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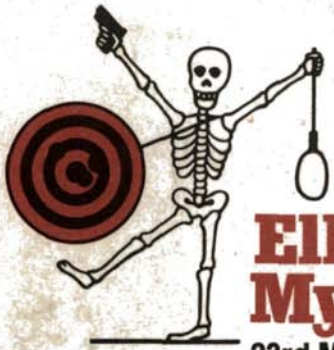

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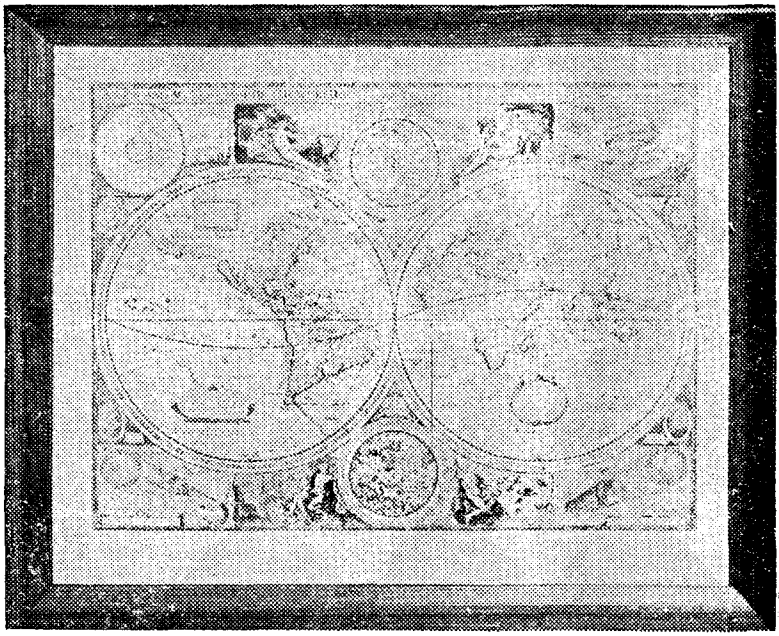

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the *NEWEST* Mr. Behrens spy story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

It was one of the most complex spy operations (possibly the most complex) that Mr. Behrens had ever been involved in, and one of the most important (probably the most important) of the war, and one of the most terrifying (definitely the most terrifying) for Mr. Behrens. It concerned a daring infiltration, a newly invented wireless fuse, a message satchel containing high-priority dispatches—a spy-and-counterspy operation full of conspiracy and doublecross, of explosives and explosive plans and counterplans . . .

EYES THAT MISS NOTHING

by MICHAEL GILBERT

THE GERMAN ARTILLERY OBSERVATION officer said, "I shall now proceed to range one gun onto the slit trench. If you will use your binoculars, gentlemen, you will observe it quite easily at the foot of that small knoll due east."

The small group of privileged spectators raised field glasses in gloved hands and focused them.

"The trench is exactly one and a half meters deep and one meter wide. It has been dug into chalk and flint. Owing to unavoidable discrepancies in the charges, it would not normally be possible to guarantee to hit the trench more than once in a hundred rounds."

"I wager," said General Runnecke, who commanded XIV Corps in the Banja Luka area of Yugoslavia and who was, therefore, nominally at least the senior officer present, "that he did all his ranging before we arrived."

"In his place I should have done so," agreed the staff officer with the gunner tabs who was standing at his elbow.

"Fire!"

The report from the gun, sited some 5000 yards to their rear, arrived at the same time as the shell, which threw up a puff of white chalk and gray smoke just beyond the slit trench.

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"Correct for line," said the observation officer smugly. "Plus for range. I will drop fifty meters and repeat."

The second shell landed, if anything, slightly farther forward.

"You will see what I meant when I spoke of the inaccuracy of a high explosive charge," said the observation officer. "The range that time was shorter but the shell went farther. I shall fire again at the same elevation."

This one landed almost on the lip of the trench.

"Two plus, one minus," said the observation officer. "I think we can accept that as the range. We will now repeat, using the new experimental fuse"

There was a stir of interest among the spectators. This time it was different. Instead of a dull report when the shell landed, there was the sharp distinctive crack of shrapnel.

"Height of burst," said the observation officer, "approximately ten meters. That should be satisfactory."

"Damned uncomfortable, if you ask me," said General Runnecke loudly, and the officers laughed. The only man who appeared entirely serious, his gaze concentrated on the slit trench, was the single civilian among the uniformed group. He was a thin, serious, brown-faced man in his early thirties, with a pair of steel-rimmed glasses on his beaky nose. Despite the January weather he wore only a thin raincoat and seemed unaffected by the cold.

He said, in good but clearly not native German, "By my estimation, seven and a half meters."

The observation officer ignored this and said, "I shall now order the same gun to fire six rounds. This will avoid the necessity of ranging the other guns of the troop, but will produce the cumulative effect of a salvo of six guns."

The six cracks followed each other at twenty-second intervals. The height of burst was unmistakably consistent. As fast as one cloud of yellowish lyddite smoke shredded away in the breeze, another filled its place.

"Stand your troop down," said the General. "We will inspect the target. Come along with me, Dr. Brancos."

The whole group moved downhill toward the slit trench, the general with the civilian in the lead, followed by a stout white-faced officer wearing the insignia of a Gruppenfuehrer in the S.S.; the junior officers were a decorous pace or two behind. At the edge of the trench they paused.

There were six men in it. They had been fastened there by a chain attached at both ends to posts hammered into the ground; the chain passed through iron shackles round an ankle of each man. Four of the six were clearly and horribly dead. Two of them were still moving.

General Runnecke motioned to the junior officer behind him, who drew an automatic, stepped for-

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ward, and shot them both carefully through the back of the neck.

"I think," said the General to Dr. Brancos, "that we may regard the experiment as eminently satisfactory."

Dr. Brancos, who appeared to be as unmoved as any of his military colleagues by the grotesque mess of blood, clothing, and flesh in the trench, said, "I should like to examine, with your doctors, the precise nature of the wounds in the four who were killed. It was unfortunate that you felt obliged to shoot the other two. If they had lived, it would have been even more interesting to have examined *their* injuries."

"No doubt," said General Runnecke curtly.

In a report which he sent that evening to the War Ministry in Berlin he wrote, "In this experiment we were able to make use of six Yugoslav terrorists who had been captured in plain clothes behind our lines in possession of explosives, and who were to have been executed in any event. One equivalent salvo of the new fuse killed four men and fatally injured two. This represents the quite dramatic superiority of this wireless fuse over the standard powder fuse for shrapnel, which, as every artillery officer knows, can never be guaranteed to detonate within a hundred feet of the ground, and, indeed, in half of the cases buries itself in the ground and fails to detonate at all. I would recommend that Dr. Brancos be put in touch forthwith with the Army Bureau of Weapon Research—"

As he wrote these last words the General paused. He knew that the all powerful Reichssicherheitshauptamt, or RSHA, the coordinating body of the S.S., had recently added to its already inflated authority a Section VII concerned with scientific exploitation, and he suspected that they would want to grab Dr. Brancos for themselves as an important pawn in their constant struggle with the Army for power and prestige. What the General was wondering was whether he could arrange for his report to go to the War Ministry *without* being seen by the S.S. authorities.

He might have spared himself any worry. The S.S. Gruppenfuehrer had already reported through his own signals troop to the RSHA, who received the report a day before the War Ministry received the General's.

When Dr. Brancos arrived in Berlin, therefore, he was not met by an Army officer but by a polite Obersturmfuehrer, who introduced himself as Lieutenant Mailler, and whisked the doctor straight away to an apartment at Lichterfelde outside Berlin. Here, in the days that followed, Mailler proved himself a patient and instructed listener. He had been trained in the Communications section of the S.S. and knew a good deal about radio. He had to admit, however that Dr. Brancos knew a great deal more than he did.

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The doctor said, "I am, by profession, a mining engineer. Coming from a small country like Albania there were few facilities, and I was therefore educated and trained in Italy—at Perugia, and later in Milan. I speak better Italian than German, I fear."

Mailler said, with a smile, "You speak our language very well and clearly."

"I am obliged. It was in the uranium mines at Marcovograd that I developed the technique of the answering fuse. Like most inventions, the idea came to me by accident. In the mines we used a type of Geiger counter. You know what I mean?"

"I have heard of them."

"They are, in essence, small receiving sets. They answer to the radioactive emissions of uranium. Once we had a very difficult explosive blast to detonate." Dr. Brancos held out two thin brown hands. "In the mass of uranium we bury an explosive charge. The uranium emits radio signals. Could we not, I said to myself, cause those signals to bounce back and detonate the charge at any required distance? All that would be necessary would be to calculate the wave length precisely—" the doctor brought his two hands slowly together "—and pouf! We cause an explosion at exactly the point we require without wires or apparatus of any sort."

"And did it work?"

"In mining, no. It was impracticable. But the seed of the idea was there. A shrapnel shell with a small and simple wireless transmitter in the head. It approaches the earth. The transmission bounces back—at whatever height you wish—and the shell explodes. No more powder rings, no more fuse setting, no more guesswork. A detonation at precisely the most effective height."

"Wonderful," said Mailler, and he meant it.

"There were difficulties. My prototype fuses were much too sensitive. They could be set off by rain—even by a flock of birds. But I developed a system of shutters—"

Dr. Brancos seized a writing pad and pencil and started to sketch as he talked.

At the end of two hours, his brain whirling with technicalities, Lieutenant Mailler made his excuses. He spoke on the telephone to the head of his section, Standartenfuehrer Bach. "The man is a genius," Mailler said. "I'm sure of that. I lost him half a dozen times in the details, but the idea *must* be sound. It operates on the same principle as radar—"

"It is certainly effective," said Colonel Bach. "I have received the close-up photographs of the target trench. I am only glad I saw them after lunch and not before."

"He could be a great asset."

"*If* we get him," said Bach. "The Army wants him for themselves. There is a fight going on now on a level too high for me to interfere. By the way, I assume you checked his security clearance?"

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"All the ordinary checks have been made," said Mailler. "His papers are in order. His luggage has been thoroughly examined and contains nothing out of the way. It would, of course, be more satisfactory if we could obtain a positive identification."

Bach thought about this and then said, "There is a man in the Balkan Department of Section VI. The name, I think, is Munthe. He comes from Albania or Montenegro, or one of those damned holes, and he was a professor at Perugia. He should know Brancos, by name at least."

Professor Munthe, old, gray-haired, and white-bearded, examined the papers which Mailler laid on his desk, and shook his head slowly. He said, "This man is a fake. Possibly a spy. I was at Perugia during all the years he states that he was there. We had not more than a handful of Albanians. There was no Dr. Brancos among them."

"You are sure?" said Mailler anxiously. "It is most important. The reputations of some very senior officers are now involved."

"If you doubt me, confront him with me."

"I will be back in half an hour," said Mailler, and was better than his word.

When Dr. Brancos came into his office, Professor Munthe rose to his feet and stared at him fixedly. The doctor stared back, then a half smile crossed his face. "It is more than ten years," he said "but you have not greatly changed, Herr Professor."

The old man blinked as if he was trying to recapture an elusive memory. When the doctor would have spoken again, Munthe held up one finger in a gesture of the classroom and said, "*Not* Brancos. Boros—Stefan Boros."

"It is true," said Brancos. "I had family difficulties. I found it expedient to change my name."

"Now that you mention it, I remember being told of it. I met a mutual friend a year or two ago in Ravenna—Alessandro Piero."

Lieutenant Mailler said hastily, "I can see you are old friends. You will have much to talk over, so I will leave you."

He made his way straight to his own office on a lower floor of the building, extracted a flask of brandy from a drawer in his desk, and treated himself to a stiff drink.

If Brancos had been a fraud and his invention a fake and a lot of important people had made fools of themselves, he had a shrewd idea that his own head would have been one of the first to roll.

As he was finishing the drink the telephone on his desk purred. The man at the other end was so senior that the Lieutenant clicked his heels and stood rigidly to attention when answering it. His end of the conversation was confined to saying "Yes" a half dozen times, and finally "At once."

And to Dr. Brancos, later that

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evening, he said, "The Fuehrer himself has made the decision. Your invention will go to the Eastern front. You yourself are seconded to Army Group North with the temporary rank of Major. You will be flown to Rzhev on the Volga tomorrow."

Dr. Brancos said, "Impossible. I shall have to spend tomorrow doing some shopping." He seemed unexcited by this dramatic turn of events.

"Shopping?"

"If I'm to be a Major I shall need a uniform surely?"

"All that will be provided at Rzhev."

All that, and a great deal more, was provided in the months that followed. Army Group North had been commanded, during the hard fighting of the previous autumn and the stalemate of that spring, by General Helmuth Busche, whose star was now so firmly in the ascendant that he was spoken of as a possible supreme commander of the Eastern front.

Busche was a tall, fair-haired, red-faced Saxon, nearly six and a half feet in height, and Dr. Brancos observed him from afar and learned that he was a great man; he was recognized as an excellent soldier by the hardest school of professional military opinion in the world, yet he managed somehow to be liked as well as admired.

The doctor himself was placed under the command of Colonel Franz Mulbach, head of the Army Communications section, and was allotted as his workshop and quarters a hut in the forest of huts which had sprung up in and around the ruins of Rzhev.

This hut, in the months that followed, became the center of much activity involving technicians from both the Artillery and the Signals sections of the army. From time to time Dr. Brancos would pay visits to forward observation posts to check the accuracy of his fuses, which were now going into mass production.

"If they are to achieve maximum effect," he said, "we must be careful not to demonstrate them too soon. When we fire them we will get them to explode at irregular heights so that they will appear to observers on the Russian side no different from the old, inefficient powder fuses. They will then take no special precautions."

Colonel Mulbach, a jovial barrel of a man, agreed with this. He had walked over, as he sometimes did, late at night, to sit beside the stove in Dr. Brancos' hut, smoke a cigar, and talk about the war.

"As you will have seen," he said, "from your visits to the front—you must not, incidentally, expose yourself unnecessarily—to lose you now would be a fatal blow to the Reich—we are up against a hard line of interlocked defensive positions. The Russians have had all winter to deepen and strengthen their trenches. When our offensive starts,

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the neutralization of these trenches will be a most important factor."

"Has a date been fixed?"

"It will depend a little on the weather. This cursed Russian winter is slow to relax its grip, but the last week of April or the first week of May is spoken of, and it is then that we may expect a most important visitor."

"You mean—?"

"I mean our Fuehrer himself. He will come in person to confer with our commanders, to lay down the general lines of strategy, and to wish us good fortune. I understand that he has expressed a personal interest in the work that you are doing here. It may even be possible to introduce you to him."

As Dr. Brancos moved his head the red light from the stove shone on his glasses. He said, "It would be an indescribable honor."

It was a week after this conversation, in the early evening, that Colonel Mulbach arrived to find Dr. Brancos at work on his blueprints. The Colonel had brought his car and was in full uniform. He said, "I am to take you to see General Busche. He wishes to speak to you."

"About what?" said Dr. Brancos. He seemed irritated by the interruption of his work.

"That we shall see," said the Colonel.

During the drive into the center of Rzhev the Colonel was more silent than usual. They dismounted at the side door of the big square seminary which formed the personal headquarters of the General, walked along an endless and echoing corridor without meeting a soul, climbed flights of stairs and traversed further passageways, their footsteps deadened now by strips of matting laid on the floor. At the end of this corridor they came to double doors which opened onto an anteroom.

Here there were two desks set at angles and positioned to guard an inner door. Cards on the desk identified the men behind them as Major Nachtigal and Captain Heimroth. The Captain rose to his feet, shook hands with Colonel Mulbach, cast a critical look at Dr. Brancos' creased and ill-fitting uniform, went over to the inner door, knocked, and went inside.

There was a murmur of conversation, the door reopened, and he reappeared and beckoned the visitors in. It was a comfortable room. A fire of logs was blazing in the open stove and in front of it, tall, erect, and strikingly impressive in the undress uniform of the Prussian Guards Regiment, stood General Helmuth Busche.

The General waited until the door had clicked shut, then turned to Colonel Mulbach and said in German, "So! This is the little English spy who has been sent to help us kill the Fuehrer." And then, in labored but understandable English, "How do you do, Mr. Bairentz?" He extended his hand.

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Back in the Brancos hut, with the door safely bolted, Colonel Mulbach said, "I hope you will forgive my reticence of the last few months. It was necessary to make certain checks first."

"I was beginning to wonder," said Mr. Behrens, "if I was on a wild goose chase. All we knew in London was that a plot was being hatched by a group of officers on the Eastern front to kill Hitler and end the war by negotiation and that they needed technical assistance. We thought that if I played my cards right, I would be sent here and the plotters would make contact with me. That's really all I knew."

"I must confess," said the Colonel "that I am surprised you have penetrated as far as you have."

"Part of it was calculation, part luck. The calculation consisted of giving away our new V.T. fuse. We reckoned that you scientists would arrive at it sooner or later. What we were presenting them with was eighteen months of our own research."

"A tempting bait. And the luck?"

"We happened to have a contact in your RSHA with exactly the necessary knowledge to check my credentials. In fact, my story was carefully tailored to fit in with his. So it was pretty certain that a confrontation between us would be arranged."

"Even so," said the Colonel, "Lady Fortune must have smiled on you. You can have little idea of the thoroughness of our security machine. Everyone—certainly every official in the Reich from village postmaster to Commanding General—has a dosier in that giant card-index of the section known as Amt IV(a) 6(a)—harmless sounding initials for an unparalleled instrument of tyranny! The information in those cards has been collected or extorted by the Gestapo, and when you consider that normal interrogation may involve a thin steel spike being driven down the center of your finger until it reaches the knuckle bone—and that for rigorous interrogation there may be substituted a screw-threaded spike which can be slowly rotated—you will appreciate that very few men or women are likely to withhold information."

"No," said Mr. Behrens, "I can see that."

"You will appreciate also the risks which are run by those who dream of conspiring against the head of such a State. Even when those dreams are no more than thoughts whispered to oneself. General Busche is a patriot. His record is clean. When Germany has lost the war—as she will in a year or two—he could look forward to the certainty of retirement—Army Group Commanders are very rarely casualties, even on the Ost-Front—and an honorable old age on his estates in Prussia.

"Instead, so as to have the chance of shortening the war by two years with a negotiated peace, he is pre-

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pared to face ignominy and death. On the last occasion that a conspirator was detected he was hanged, yes, but not on a rope. He was hanged by a steel butcher's hook through the point of his jaw. It took him three hours to die of pain and slow suffocation. Every minute of those hours was recorded on film so that the Fuehrer might entertain himself that evening. A feature film, you might say."

"Loathsome," said Mr. Behrens.

The Colonel seemed not to hear him. He said, almost to himself, "We are coming to Gotterdamerung —to the twilight of the Gods. The time when the men of power at last realize that they too must perish, and determine to go out in a holocaust of blood and cruelty and death. When an Emperor of the Chaldeans died, five hundred slaves were killed to keep him company. Many more than five hundred Germans will perish if the Russians' hammer from the East strikes home on the anvil of the American and British forces in the West."

"Curiously enough," said Mr. Behrens drily, "we should ourselves have no objection to ending the war two years early. Had we ended our previous war in 1916, England would be a far different country today."

"You are right," said the Colonel. His big face, which had gone red, now cracked into a smile. "As always, the British are practical. No more heroics then—down to details. When the Fuehrer arrives, he will come in a Junkers 52 of his own flight. When he returns to his Headquarters at Rastenburg, it is normal for any high-priority dispatches to go with him in a special satchel. This bag will contain, in a secret compartment, enough explosive to destroy the plane and a time fuse which must be set for one hour and must be completely reliable. Do you think you can make it for us?"

"That is what I am here for," said Mr. Behrens.

"Good. Apart from the General there are only three men fully in the conspiracy. Two of them you met this evening, Major Nachtigal and Captain Heimroth. They are reliable. They are related to the General by blood. The third is Luftwaffe Major Lecke. He was absent today checking the probable flight schedules. He too is trustworthy. Unfortunately none of these three men can actually place the message satchel on the Fuehrer's plane. It would not normally be part of their duties, and to make the slightest abnormal move would invite immediate attention from eyes that miss nothing. However, we have Major Meudel."

"And who is Major Meudel?"

"He is an S.S. Major, my subordinate in the Signals, and has for some months been in treasonable communication, by radio, with the Russians."

"He has *what?*"

"It is not uncommon. Nor is it too

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difficult. When the S.S. capture Russian agents they torture them to extract their codes and frequencies and then use them for themselves. Their excuse, of course, is that they are using these means to convey false information to the enemy. Once contact has been established, liaison can safely follow. A radio message leaves no incriminating copy behind it."

"And what does Major Meudel hope to gain by his treason?"

"He is not doing it for himself but on behalf of S.S. General Pohl who commands all S.S. troops in this area. General Pohl likes to have his bread buttered on both sides. If we win, he will protect himself by having Major Meudel murdered. Probably me too, since I know of it. On the other hand, if we lose and are surrounded and ordered to fight to the last—an order our Fuehrer is very fond of giving—then he can use this established line of communication to go over to the Russians as a welcome guest."

"But—" said Mr. Behrens.

"You wonder how this assists us? That, too, is simple. Once Major Meudel knows that there is a chance of Hitler being killed, of the regular Army gaining control—his own troops would follow General Busche to a man—and the S.S. being reduced to impotence, he knows that I would report him to General Busche, who would have him shot. Therefore, to save his hide he will do what I tell him. As an S.S. Signals Major he is exactly the person to carry a message satchel to the airfield and place it on the Fuehrer's plane."

"You call it Gotterdamerung," said Mr. Behrens crossly. "For my taste it's not grand opera at all. It's low and vicious farce. Does no one in this army play straight by anyone else? Does no one trust anyone?"

Major Mulbach said, with a smile, "I trust you. Surely that is enough."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Behrens. "I didn't mean to lose my temper. It's only because I'm so damned scared."

The work itself was not hard to organize. Mr. Behrens was able to do most of it openly in his workshop. But there were technical difficulties.

"Remember," Colonel Mulbach had said, "what you devise must be silent, and it must not be too heavy. The satchel will be carried to the plane by Major Meudel, but it will have to be handed over there to one of the crew, and he must not have his suspicions aroused."

Mr. Behrens abandoned any idea of using a clockwork fuse. Instead, he arranged two wires of identical thickness running through glass tubes into which acid was injected when the fuse was set. When the wire was finally eaten through, it released a plunger, which detonated the main charge of polar ammonite. If one failed for any reason, the other would do the job.

The whole apparatus had then to

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be carefully fitted into the false bottom of a satchel, smuggled to him by the Colonel, and covered by a closely fitting sheet of colored wood. The activating switch was underneath the handle of the bag.

During all this time, Mr. Behrens, mindful of the eyes that missed nothing, continued his normal routine of visits to the front line. It was on his return from one of these that he noticed that something odd was happening. Colonel Mulbach's driver, Lorenz, said, "It is true. The soldiers are going out and the S.S. are coming in."

Mulbach confirmed this late that evening.

He said, "All three of the regular battalions which have been doing camp and headquarters duties are being sent up into the line. They are being replaced by Waffen S.S. It is represented as a normal redeployment for the coming offensive."

The two men looked at each other.

"It *could* be no more than that," said Mr. Behrens.

"Or it could be the normal precautions which are always taken when Hitler visits his loyal troops," said the Colonel. "But if so, it is in this case being carried to an unprecedented extreme. By an order posted this morning, command of the whole Headquarters area, including both airfields, has been transferred to S.S. General Pohl."

"You mean that Busche has been superseded?"

"Not superseded. He remains in command of the Army group, but during the period of the Fuehrer's visit, the troops in this area are not his troops and are not under his command."

"When is Hitler arriving?"

"According to present information he lands at Airfield South on Sunday afternoon."

In fact, Hitler landed at Airfield North at midday on Monday. At six o'clock that evening a Berlin acquaintance reappeared. It was S.S. Obersturmfuehrer Mailler. He shook hands with Mr. Behrens and said, "I have orders to bring you to Headquarters. A historic privilege awaits you."

In an anteroom of the Headquarters building, Mr. Behrens was subjected to a polite but extremely thorough and professional search. A small pair of folding nail scissors was removed from him with apologies, and he was conducted to another room. This was crowded with high-ranking officers of the Army and Air Force, most of whom he had never seen before. They were standing about in groups and talking softly.

"You must not be nervous," said Mailler.

"I'll try not to be," said Mr. Behrens.

Thirty minutes later a stout Major opened the far door and beckoned to Mailler, who laid one hand on Mr. Behrens' arm and propelled him forward.

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A man of middle height and thick build, wearing a gray uniform jacket and black riding breeches, was standing behind a table and looking down at the maps on it. There were other men in the room too, but Mr. Behrens had eyes only for one. The flat-tipped nose and porcine nostrils with the spout of black hair below them; the gray face and pouches of gray skin below the eyes; the eyes black and very small—tiny windows into the furnace inside.

The revulsion was so strong in him that Mr. Behrens felt his mouth dry up.

Hitler lifted his lips in a brief smile.

"He is speechless. No harm in that. In the Reich, deeds come before words."

The Fuehrer half turned, and one of the staff officers handed him an open box. Hitler took out the small gun-metal cross, leaned forward across the table, and pinned it to the lapel of Mr. Behrens' coat.

Mr. Behrens had the presence of mind to throw up his arm in a Nazi salute. The next moment he was outside and Mailler was shaking him by the hand.

"A remarkable privilege," he said, "that he should pin it onto you with his own hand!" The medal was slightly askew. "You must never move it."

"It shall stay just where it is," said Mr. Behrens fervently, "until I finally take this uniform off my back."

Later he was able to examine his award more closely. It was the Dresdener-Kreuz with crossed palm leaves. The inscription underneath said: For Arduous and Faithful Service in the Cause of Right and Progress.

The convoy drove slowly out toward Airfield North. The Fuehrer's car, flying his personal standard, lay second in line behind the leading vehicle; it was crammed with guards and surrounded by a protective screen of motor-cyclists. Third in line came S.S. General Pohl; behind him General Busche, with his personal staff officers, Major Nachtigal and Captain Heimroth; then a second carload of S.S., and a sixth car carrying Colonel Mulbach, Major Meudel, and Mr. Behrens. A seventh car, full of guards, brought up the rear.

Mr. Behrens was not happy. Mulbach was sitting in front next to the S.S. driver and Mr. Behrens could see nothing but his bull-neck and massive shoulders. Major Meudel was in the back, beside him. He had not spoken a word since the drive started. He looked a most unreliable conspirator. He was white and sweating, breathing quickly and unable to control his hands.

"Good Lord," thought Mr. Behrens. "Why did they have to choose a man like this? A child could see that he's up to no good. He'll fall flat on his face before he gets halfway to the airplane."

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A thought struck him. Had Major Meudel, not trusting himself to do it unobtrusively on the airfield under the eyes of the guards, already set the fuse, and was he now afraid that some unexpected delay might keep them hanging about for an hour before take-off? It would certainly account for his nervousness.

Mr. Behrens bent his head to look at the satchel which stood on the floor between them. It was then that the full shock hit him.

It was not the satchel he had prepared!

It was very like it—but it was not the same. He had worked on it too long to be deceived. The stitching was slightly different and the color a shade lighter.

As he thought wildly, turning over various permutations of treachery in his mind, the car swung to the right, over a dry ditch and onto the perimeter of the airfield.

The driver jammed on his brakes so hard that the car behind nearly ran into them. He shouted something and pointed out of the window as a pandemonium of noise erupted.

Six Russian fighter planes, coming low out of the sun, dived at the convoy, their cannons blazing.

Mr. Behrens jerked the near door open and rolled into the ditch. The driver landed on top of him. Round the airstrip, after a moment of paralyzed silence, the German antiaircraft guns opened up, but they were firing into an empty sky. The six planes, hedgehopping, had swung right with the precision of well trained chorus girls and had disappeared in the direction of their own lines.

In thirty seconds it was all over. As the firing died away, Mr. Behrens cautiously raised his head.

Most of the occupants of the rear three cars had reached the ditch. The people in the front four cars, having nowhere to go, had either jumped out on the far side of the cars and lain flat, or had simply stayed put. Most of the casualties had occurred in the thick lines of black-shirted troops surrounding the perimeter, and field ambulances were already on the move.

Major Mulbach was standing beside their car. He pointed. Whatever Major Meudel's troubles had been, they were now over. He was sprawled across the back seat. A bullet had gone through the back of his skull. The message satchel was still on the floor of the car. The Major's blood was dripping onto it from a pool which had formed on the edge of the seat.

Mr. Behrens took the satchel, feeling as he did so for the catch under the handle. His guess had been wrong. The fuse was not yet set.

Footsteps approached the car. Mr. Behrens looked up and saw an S.S. Colonel, unknown to him, approaching. The Colonel gave a quick disinterested glance at Major Meudel, took the satchel from Mr. Behrens, swung on his heel, and

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walked back toward the head of the convoy where interest seemed to be centering round the front two cars. Mr. Behrens followed cautiously.

Every instinct told him that something had gone badly wrong and that he ought to keep clear. It was professional pride alone which took him forward.

A dozen Russian bullets had whipped through the back of Hitler's car, apparently without hitting anyone. The car itself was empty. Of Hitler there was no sign at all.

In front of the car stood S.S. General Pohl, squat and self-possessed, backed by a semicircle of staff officers and guards. General Busche had got out of his car and was approaching with Major Nachtigal on one side and Captain Heimroth on the other. Approaching was the wrong word. They were being driven forward by the S.S. guards behind them.

The scene reminded Mr. Behrens of something, but for a second he could not put his finger on it. Then everything clicked into place.

What he was witnessing was a field court-martial.

General Pohl said, "As you observe, General Busche, the Fuehrer changed his plans at the last moment. He decided to leave from Airfield South, and should by now—" Pohl made play of consulting his watch "—be well on his way back to Rastenburg."

General Busche examined the bullet-riddled car and said, "It was fortunate for him that he changed his mind."

"Very fortunate, and a demonstration that Providence intends that he should live to fulfill his glorious destiny. Yes?"

"No doubt about it," said General Busche.

"He instructed me, however, to add," said General Pohl, and the sneer in his voice was no longer concealed, "that the bag of dispatches which was to have been placed in his plane is of such importance that he insists they be taken to Rastenburg at once."

"I see."

"And since there are a number of matters, General Busche, urgent and important matters, which he desires to discuss with you, he has decided that you should yourself fly back to Rastenburg with the dispatches. Major Nachtigal and Captain Heimroth will accompany you. The plane will be flown by Luftwaffe Major Lecke. He is already at the controls."

Pohl indicated the Junker 52 standing on the airstrip. He added, "You will be in no danger *from the Russians,* General. A fighter escort will accompany you for the first hour of your flight. After that you should be in need of no further assistance."

There was a long silence. Then General Pohl said, in tones of elaborate surprise, "You are not hesitating, General, to obey the direct order of our Fuehrer?"

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General Busche glanced for a moment at the group which surrounded him, at the massed ranks of the S.S. beyond, and up at the clear sky above. Then he gestured to Heimroth and Nachtigal and they walked forward and climbed into the plane. The S.S. Colonel followed and handed in the blood-stained satchel. The door shut, the props turned, the Junker 52 taxied down the runway and took off into the light breeze, turned slowly, and headed west.

From the nearby Luftwaffe airfield came the roar of the fighters as they followed the Junker 52 up into the air. The men on the ground watched as the planes flew steadily westward, diminished in size, became specks in the deep blue Russian sky, and disappeared at last.

Mr. Behrens remembered little of the drive back to Headquarters, or of the rest of that day. No one took any particular interest in him and he was not sure whether this was a good sign or a bad one. After dark that evening there was a quiet knock on his door. He opened it with one hand deep in his jacket pocket.

Colonel Mulbach came in, walking softly like a doctor visiting a very sick man, and closed the door carefully behind him.

Mr. Behrens went to the cupboard and took out a bottle of schnapps and two glasses and brought them across to the stove. He said, "What went wrong? Or don't you know? And what is going to happen next? Or don't you know that either?"

"What went wrong," said Mulbach, "is that Major Meudel changed his mind. He decided that Hitler's demon would preserve him, just as it has in the past in many such attempts, and that the S.S. would prevail over the Army. Having come to this conclusion he behaved perfectly logically. He went to General Pohl and exposed the whole plot to him."

"The whole of it? You and me as well?"

"Rest assured that he did not mention you or me. If he had done so we should not still have our teeth and fingernails." Mulbach poured the schnapps down his throat with a quick twist of his wrist and held the glass out to be refilled. "He told what he knew. No more. That General Busche and his three staff officers were planning to kill the Fuehrer with a bomb which he, Meudel, was to place on the plane. The satchel was to be given to him by General Busche personally. He knew no more.

"Whereupon Pohl—he is an able man, and now that Heydrich has gone he might aspire one day to Himmler's job—Pohl devised the pantomime you saw this morning. It would have been too great a shock to morale if a popular commander like Busche had been relieved of his command and placed under arrest on the very eve of the offensive. So

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he and his three fellow conspirators were offered an easy alternative to the Gestapo torture cells and death on the hooks. A clean and sudden death in the air."

"It wasn't the bomb I made," said Mr. Behrens. "I noticed that in the car."

"It was a replica. They would keep the original for examination."

"But since it wasn't mine they'd have no means of knowing when it was going to explode. It might have been half an hour. It might have been three hours."

"That was why they threw it out of the plane soon after they were airborne. They had no desire to sit about waiting for death. Then they flew the plane straight into the ground."

Mr. Behrens poured himself a second glass of schnapps, rotated it slowly in the crimson glow from the stove, and said, "How on earth do you know all this? About Meudel, I mean, and the S.S. counterplan?"

"General Pohl told me. I am his confidant, naturally. I arrange his communications with the Russians. He does not know that I had any connection with the bomb plot. I think the only man who may dimly have suspected that particular tie-up was our late friend, Major Meudel."

"I suppose that was why you shot him?"

"You saw me?"

"I saw nothing. I was too busy rolling into the ditch like most of the others, but I noticed that the bullet had gone through the back of his neck and come out at the *top* of his head. It seemed an odd sort of trajectory for a bullet fired from an aircraft. Incidentally, you were lucky that the raid gave you the opportunity to do it."

"I arranged it on the radio last night."

"Good Lord." Mr. Behrens swallowed his schnapps. "Wasn't that rather dangerous?"

"Not so dangerous as leaving Meudel alive."

"I suppose not. What happens now?"

"What will happen next is that the team of experts who are being specially flown here from Berlin will examine the real bomb. They will do their work with great thoroughness. Each piece of material used in it will be subjected to microscopic analysis. Sooner or later they will conclude, without doubt, that it must have been made in your workshop."

"And then?" asked Mr. Behrens.

"You are a very brave man," said Colonel Mulbach, "but are you sure that under the *special* methods of interrogation which they will employ you might not weaken and implicate *me?*"

"A remedy has been provided for that."

"A cyanide pill? But that is a defeatist solution."

"Can you think of any other?"

"Certainly. I have arranged to have you captured by the Russians.

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I think that will be the best way of insuring your safety."

"But what about you?"

"Oh, I have been very discreet," said Colonel Mulbach. "You will have noticed that my visits to you have been made only after dark. My driver, Lorenz, knows of them, of course. I think you had better take him with you."

"I think you'd better come too."

Colonel Mulbach considered the matter, then he said, "No. With Meudel gone and Pohl on my side, I shall be safe enough. The game is not yet over—not yet. I'll stay and see it out."

"You're a braver man than me," said Mr. Behrens.

The Commander of the tank squadron looked doubtful. He said, "That village is almost a No Man's Land, Dr. Brancos. Could you not get observation from here?"

"Of a sort," said Mr. Behrens, "but not flank observation."

"Then I shall have to send a troop to protect you. And for that I should have to have instructions from higher up. In view of the coming offensive we have been ordered not to take risks with our tanks."

"That I appreciate, but there is nothing to prevent me going forward on foot. My driver can carry the wire and telephone. Your signaler will pay out the reel carefully and stand by to take down my messages at this end. You will be in no danger."

"I was not thinking of the danger," said the officer stiffly, "but of my orders. However, if you insist on risking your own life, that is entirely a matter for you."

He watched Mr. Behrens and his driver crawl forward up a ditch, reappear briefly at the far end, and finally disappear into the rubble of what had once been a Russian village.

The wire on the reel snaked out steadily. The signaler, who was watching it, said, "He is going very far forward. He is a brave man."

"He is a blasted fool," said the officer.

From the far side of the village came a shot, more shots, then the beat of a heavy Russian machine gun.

The officer swore. "Now we shall have to try to rescue him," he said, "and shall lose a couple of tanks in doing it."

In fact, he ran into a very carefully prepared ambush and lost six.

Two hours later Mr. Behrens was seated in the Headquarters of the 143rd Russian Infantry Assault Brigade. His knowledge of Russian was sufficient to enable him to carry on a limited conversation with the youthful Brigadier and his much older Brigade Intelligence officer who had turned out, disconcertingly, to be a woman.

"We have informed Moscow of your arrival," said the Brigadier, "and they will be sending a plane for you tomorrow. Meanwhile, we

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have been told to make you as comfortable as possible. We are a little primitive here, I am afraid."

"It looks just like home to me," said Mr. Behrens.

The woman said something and the Brigadier smiled. He said, "Yes. Play it back to us on the loudspeaker." And to Mr. Behrens, "You will be interested in a message we monitored and recorded this morning. It appears to have originated from an aircraft radio."

The loudspeaker in the corner clicked and cleared its throat; and then out of the ether General Busche spoke.

"With only a few minutes to live," he said, "I should like to speak to anyone who can hear me. Our country is in great peril. Unless we come to our senses, awake out of our sleep and throw off the gang of criminals and perverts headed by the maniac who calls himself our Fuehrer—"

Here the message got buried in an outburst of static. "They are trying to jam the wave length," said the woman."

Then, for a moment, the interference died down and Mr. Behrens heard General Busche say, "I, who am about to die, salute you, my country. You will survive this foul tyranny and you will rise again, purer, stronger, and greater."

Dominating the sound track now was the airplane note of the engine as it went into a power dive, a high shuddering scream of ill-treated machinery, reaching a crescendo. Then, at the last moment, silence.

The woman got up and switched off the loudspeaker. "You don't hear the actual crash," she said. "The transmitter must have disintegrated at the moment the plane hit the ground."

Mr. Behrens was not interested in these technicalities. He was thinking, "One warring god gone to Valhalla. How long before the others join him and peace comes back to this gray, embattled world?"

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THE PTARMIGAN KNIFE

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

OVER ALL THE LAND THAT ONE day would be known as the Valley of the Dordogne in a region called France lay the peace of deep summer. The day's quota of tribesmen came home from their hunting to the summer encampment near the great cave which was the focal point of their wanderings; they brought with them two stags. It was too late in the season for reindeer or bison which would return when the brief summer was over and the long winter had begun.

Bright-Morning's heart sang within him. It was his first hunt as an equal, not as one of the older boys who followed at a distance and were allowed to act only as beaters and to help bring in the game. At 15 he was still too young to have a woman of his own to bear him children, but he had been initiated and now he was free to go into the bush at twilight with willing girls who were still unattached. Bright-Morning was a man.

And he had further reasons today for elation. His spear-point had finished off that second stag in the exact spot where, a few days earlier, he had for the first time been permitted by his father to paint a rather wavering but properly placed spear on the pictured animal —a painted beast which, after the ritual dance, had brought its living similacrum into the hunters' reach.

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Bright-Morning was the only son of the tribe's Spirit-Sayer; his mother had died when he was a small child. Long ago his father had conceded that the boy had the Gift and would some day be his successor. For a long time now Bright-Morning had been allowed to hold the stone lamp and the stone bowls of paint in the deep recesses of the cave while his father with his marvelous skill depicted the animals which the tribe wanted the spirits to send them. Soon now, little by little, the young man would begin to draw and paint and model in clay on his own, just as he was already learning the sacred songs and how to interpret the marked pebbles. But he must keep his joy to himself, for until he was openly acclaimed this was secret between him and his father.

All the men, as soon as they entered the camp, with its summer huts of sticks and woven vines scattered on the grass-covered plateau before the mouth of the cave, felt a subtle change in the ordinary routine. The women had come back from their gathering of seeds and roots and fruit, the cooking fires were lighted and ready for the stew, but there were little clumps of whisperers, and the children who usually played and shouted around the fires were being peremptorily silenced. Bright-Morning abruptly left the other hunters who mingled with the women to hear what had happened, and went straight to his father's hut, which was larger and more isolated than those of ordinary families.

The Spirit-Sayer sat on the ground studying the contents of his magic pouch. He was an old man; he had seen nearly 50 winters. His son stood respectfully at the entrance and waited until his father had replaced the bones and herbs and knots of hair in the pouch and beckoned the boy to sit beside him.

"What is it?" Bright-Morning asked.

"They have found Swift-Walker."

Three nights before, on the Eve of the Midsummer Festival, Swift-Walker—a young man a few years older than Bright-Morning, a fine hunter, no great thinker but taller and more handsome than most of the men of the tribe—had lain down to sleep with the other men who did not yet share a hut with a woman and their young ones. In the morning Swift-Walker was gone, and he had not been seen since. At first no one noticed; he had gone perhaps to bathe in the river, or he had followed some fox or other small animal that one hunter could handle by himself. But when night came again and still he had not returned, his mother and her kinsmen—his father was long since dead—had begun to search. There had been no trace of him. Perhaps he had drowned.

"Where? Alive?" Bright-Morning asked.

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"No, dead. Two women went deep in the forest to find a honey tree and discovered the body. It is still there. At first light I shall send a party out to carry him back for burial."

"What animal killed him?"

"No animal. The birds and beasts had been at him, but his throat was cut deeply, with the clean slice of a knife."

Bright-Morning reflected. Beasts of the wide fields, perhaps, could inflict such an injury—a horse's sharp hoof, the claws of a lion—but none of the animals of the forest that covered the foothills.

"Cloud-Woman was one of the two who found him. She is very discreet. She picked up this beside him, hid it in the folds of her garment, and brought it directly to me. She will not speak of it to anyone."

The Spirit-Sayer reached again into his pouch and took out an object that he laid carefully on the ground between them. It was a bone knife, sharpened and polished, but stained now with dark rusty spots. Its handle was a beautifully carved ptarmigan.

Bright-Morning caught his breath.

"But—but that," he stammered. "I know it. It is Red-Sky's that he carved and carries; it is chief treasure. Why haven't you called him to you and accused him?"

"Red-Sky is no fool," said his father dryly. "Aside from other good reasons, if he had killed Swift-Walker with that knife, do you think he would have been foolish enough to leave it there? Perhaps somebody stole it from him and left it so that Red-Sky would be blamed, as you just blamed him."

Bright-Morning was silent, chaotic thoughts whirling in his mind.

"I shall call a council of the tribe after we have eaten," his father went on, "and I shall ask for volunteers to go at first light tomorrow to bring back Swift-Walker's body. I want you to be the second to volunteer."

"Why not the first?"

His father smiled.

"Because the first will be Rain-in-the-Face, as usual—he never misses a chance to be conspicuous. He is a harmless showoff; we need not suspect him."

The Spirit-Sayer was right; as soon as he had told the tribe what they already knew, and asked for volunteers, Rain-in-theFace jumped to his feet. When he had been accepted, Bright-Morning then held up his hand. To his astonishment his father shook his head.

"You are too young," he said. "The task is beyond you."

That stung, and Bright-Morning retorted hotly.

"I am a man!" he asserted. "I have been initiated. What a man can do, I can do."

"Very well, then," said his father, frowning. "Since you insist, you may go."

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Then Bright-Morning understood. By refusing him at first and then reluctantly agreeing, the Spirit-Sayer had removed suspicion that he might be sending his son as a spy.

"I shall want two more," said the Spirit-Sayer, "and Cloud-Woman will go to show the way."

From the shadows in the back a heavy-set, burly man arose. It was Horse-Slayer.

"Swift-Walker was my sister's son," he said. "Take me."

"You may go. Now one more."

"Why?" asked a voice. Bright-Morning peered through the darkness, but could not identify the speaker. "Does it take four men to bring one from the forest? Swift-Walker was not a bison or a mammoth."

"We do not yet know just how Swift-Walker died," said the Spirit-Sayer. "The body was badly mutilated, as if hacked by teeth or claws or a sharp knife. There may be danger, more than three can cope with and protect Cloud-Woman as well. Who will be the fourth?"

"I will go," suddenly announced Snow-Born, Red-Sky's half brother —they had the same father, but different mothers. Bright-Morning sensed a shock of surprise among the listeners. Everybody knew that there had been bad blood between the half brothers; Snow-Born was proud of his beautifully flaked spear-points, and Red-Sky, that gifted carver, had openly derided them. And Snow-Born was a dour and surly man, not given to offering himself for extra duties. The Spirit-Sayer accepted him with a nod.

Bright-Morning caught his father's eye as the meeting dispersed, and understood the message. As soon as sleep settled on the others, he rose quietly and went soundlessly to the Spirit-Sayer's hut.

"I shall not keep you long," said the old man. "You must have your sleep and be ready to leave at dawn. I shall give you only these instructions: keep your ears and your eyes open and your mouth shut. Notice everything, however trifling, that seems the least bit unusual, and remember it to tell me when you return. Say nothing and above all accuse no one, even if you should be certain you have discovered the killer. Keep in mind that I need the answers to four questions: Who lured Swift-Walker into the deep forest at night? Who had reason to wish him dead? Why did Snow-Born volunteer? And why has Red-Sky made no complaint of the loss of his precious knife?"

The four men came back before noon, bearing Swift-Walker's corpse on a litter of woven vines. As soon as they had left at dawn, the Spirit-Sayer had ordered a grave dug in the floor of the cave, well behind the living quarters which they had used now for several winters. The hole was lined with red ochre from his own store of paints, and Swift-Walker's mother, White-

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Deer, brought out his shell necklaces and armbands to be buried with him.

After the cleansing of the dead body and of those who had touched it, the funeral was held. The men sang the death chant and the women wailed, and the Spirit-Sayer performed the traditional ritual, and Swift-Walker was placed in his grave and the earth thrown over him and stamped down by the bare feet of the young men of his own puberty group. Then Bright-Morning left the watching mourners and followed his father to the privacy of his hut. The Spirit-Sayer motioned his son to sit beside him.

"What did you observe?" he asked.

"Not very much, but a few things. When Cloud-Woman led us to the place, Snow-Born hung back and began pacing around the trees and bushes, his eyes downcast."

"Looking for the knife?"

"I suppose so, but when he saw us watching he joined us at once."

"Was there anything else? Did anyone say anything not to be expected?"

"Not really, I think. Unless I had known beforehand, I should have believed Swift-Walker had been slashed to death by tusks or claws. Rain-in-the-Face examined him carefully and exclaimed, 'Yes, our poor brother is indeed dead!' "

"Hardly unexpected, from that buffoon," commented the Spirit-Sayer.

"When he heard that, Snow-Born laughed. Horse-Slayer looked angry; he told them both to be quiet."

"Of course. Swift-Walker was his sister's son."

"It was he who lifted the body and laid it on the litter after Rain-in-the-Face and I had woven it. He and I carried it, and Cloud-Woman walked beside us, just as we showed ourselves when we came into camp. Rain-in-the-Face walked ahead of us and cut down twigs and branches that blocked our way, and Snow-Born walked behind. I glanced back once when we had just started and saw him stop and paw the earth with one foot, like a horse."

"Still hoping to find Red-Sky's knife."

"You think he knew who stole the knife and used it to kill Swift-Walker?"

"Not so fast, my son; there are still questions to be answered. Tell me, when I spoke to the meeting last evening, do you remember a woman who began to sob and then hushed abruptly?"

"Yes. I supposed it was Swift-Walker's mother."

"White-Deer is a custom-observing woman. She would never have let herself give way to grief before anyone outside her closest kin. I am old; I am not fleet of foot or strong of arm as I was once, but my sight is still keen. It was Red-Sky's woman. And my hearing is still sharp; the man who tried to prevent me from sending still another volun-

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teer was Red-Sky himself. He may have feared that Snow-Born would offer to go, as he did."

Bright-Morning gazed at his father, completely mystified. He could figure out that for some reason of his own Red-Sky had not wanted his half brother to volunteer; but what had his woman to do with it? She was fat and beautiful, a girl just nubile, and half of Red-Sky's age. The mother of his grown children had died the year before. It was rumored that Red-Sky had paid an incredible number of fine flint tools and spear-heads to She-Bear's father, He-Who-Dares, for her—had contracted for her even before his woman had died, while the girl was still an uninitiated child; but neither he nor She-Bear's father would talk about it. Swift-Walker, like all young unsettled men, had of course dallied with many girls, but so far as Bright-Morning knew he had never had anything especially to do with She-Bear.

He thought it over, and then a light broke on him. The Spirit-Sayer sat watching him quizzically. The youth burst out, "I think I see it now. Swift-Walker was going out with Red-Sky's woman whom he had paid so much for so that she would bear him many babies. Red-Sky caught them, or learned about it. So he—but how could *he* get Swift-Walker to go into the forest at night? Oh, I know—he would order his woman to lure her lover there; he could tell her that she must do it or he would kill her too. And then—"

"Red-Sky was here all that night. And as we agreed, in any event he would not have left his knife behind."

"Then he lent the knife to Snow-Born to do it for him—no, he and Snow-Born are on bad terms, so he would never—"

"They quarrel, but they are still half brothers, and that would have been a matter for near kinfolk to handle. But Snow-Born was here all night, too. You forget it was Festival Eve. Both men were among the dance leaders who spent the night with me in an inner recess of the cave while I painted their bodies. To keep the sacred paint ceremony secret, we rolled a heavy stone against the opening to the chamber. Nobody could leave until morning. Nobody did leave."

Bright-Morning shook his head. It had all got beyond him again.

"*Somebody* must have been missing from camp," he murmured. "Somebody besides Swift-Walker, I mean—the one who killed him. Or could it possibly have been someone from an enemy tribe?"

"What tribe? We have not seen strange hunters for many months, and we are at peace with all so long as we keep off one another's territory. Besides, what would Swift-Walker—or any man—have been doing in the deep forest at night? No, the killer must be of our own."

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"But who?"

"I do not yet know, but when I do it will be because the spirits have whispered it in my ear. You are very ingenious, my son, but they do not yet whisper to you."

Bright-Morning gave up. He waited for his father to say more.

But the Spirit-Sayer waved him to his feet.

"Go now," he said. "I must be alone to consult the spirits."

Bright-Morning could not keep his mind off the mystery while he waited for his father to announce the revelation which the spirits had made to him. With every other possible suspect eliminated, only She-Bear herself was left. But that solution had difficulties too. If she had yielded to Swift-Walker and taken the risk of stealing into the forest with him while Red-Sky was absent, then why kill him when she got there? Once more he decided it was beyond human ability to solve.

The night passed, and the new day, and not only Bright-Morning but all the people waited in vain. Until the Spirit-Sayer had spoken, the strange unexplained death of Swift-Walker lay like fog between man and man, something wrapped in uncomfortable silence but always in men's minds. Only Swift-Walker's nearest kin mourned him aloud, as was the custom, and would do so until the moon stood again in the same phase as on the night he had died.

Then the Spirit-Sayer emerged from his hut, where he had sat fasting and in seclusion that had kept him visible but reverentially unapproachable even by his son; and in the hour when the hunters were home again and the day's meal had been eaten, he summoned them once more around the all-night fire.

He stood before them now in full regalia—not the animal mask he wore for the Hunting Ceremony, but with his body painted in red and white, his head crowned with the feathers of the Sacred Bird of the Sun, his hands clasping the bone insignia of his spiritual power, his pouch of holy secret objects dangling from his belt. He looked over the bowed heads as if counting them, or seeking to make sure that certain ones were among them. For this council even Swift-Walker's mother and kinfolk had come from their mourning to listen to the Spirit-Sayer's great disclosure.

"Hear me, my people," he began in his deep voice. At the tone a shiver moved the communicants as wind shakes the grass in a field.

"By grace of the spirits of our dead, and the High Gods of lightning and air and mountain and sky"—it was the formula, but it always pierced the hearts of the listeners—"it has been granted to me to discover and reveal the fate of our brother Swift-Walker. Hear me. Swift-Walker died by a human hand that held a knife . . . Red-Sky,

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why did you make no outcry when you found that your knife carved with the ptarmigan was missing?"

Red-Sky rose trembling to his feet, and suddenly all present realized that he was no longer a strong man of ripe age, but old and past his manly strength.

"I was afraid and ashamed, Spirit-Sayer," he said humbly. "I was ashamed because I thought that in my absence one close to me had taken my knife, and I was afraid because it might have been done to impute to me an act I did not commit."

"You were with us all that night in the cave, so how could you have been accused? And who among those near to you would have wished to do you such an injury?"

"My half brother—" Red-Sky muttered. Snow-Born stood up angrily.

"Am I a thief?" he shouted. "No, I can feel no love for my half brother, who makes jest of my handiwork and is jealous of my skill lest it compete with his. But I did not steal his knife and I did not use it. You all know that I was with him and the other dance leaders throughout the night when Swift-Walker vanished."

"We know that, Snow-Born," said the Spirit-Sayer calmly. "And if Red-Sky wishes you suspected, it may be to hide another." So, thought Bright-Morning, it *was* She-Bear. But why? "But tell us, then, why did you volunteer to help bring back Swift-Walker's body? No, you need not answer that—I know. It was because you hoped to find the knife there, which means you knew it was lost. Whether you would have restored it to Red-Sky, in the loyalty that two sons of the same father should show each other, or would have displayed it in accusation, to cause your half brother shame and grief, I do not know—though I should like to believe it was the former you had in mind. It does not matter, since you did not succeed. Cloud-Woman found the knife when she discovered the body and brought it to me, and only my son has known that I had it; and he I know has not spoken.

"But now, Snow-Born, I want to know how you guessed the knife was missing, since Red-Sky has given no word of it—and how you guessed it was the weapon with which Swift-Walker's life was ended?"

There was a long silence. The Spirit-Sayer gazed piercingly at Snow-Born. But before the man could bring himself to speak, a figure rose from among the huddled crowd of women and children. It was She-Bear.

"I will answer for Snow-Born," she said clearly. "I know it is not seemly for a woman to speak in council, but I will take it upon me. When you, Spirit-Sayer, said that Swift-Walker had been hacked as if by a sharp knife, and when Snow-

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Born offered himself as a volunteer, fear overcame me and against my will a sob burst from me. For, earlier that day, Snow-Born had approached me and told me that he too was carving a knife. 'Since my brother is jealous of my skill,' he said, 'I cannot humble myself to ask him if I may see his knife with the ptarmigan, but in all admiration I would like to behold in what manner he accomplished the joining. Will you ask him on my behalf?'

"His words were friendly but his face was not. I was frightened, but I said only, 'It would be useless. Red-Sky does not lend and least of all to you.' Then he said, 'He has not worn his knife of late. Will you, when he is not here, take it from its hiding place and let me only examine it and return it at once to you?' My fright kept me from speech, and then he said softly, 'Or perhaps Red-Sky has lost his knife? And perhaps you alone know how he lost it, and for what use and where it is now?' And I was so overcome with fear that I started from where I stood and ran to the company of other women where he would not follow me."

"Do not believe her!" cried Snow-Born.

She-Bear stood weeping. "It is the truth," she said. "It was because I knew he suspected me that I sobbed aloud."

"What of that, Snow-Born? Does she speak truly?"

"I suppose so," the man said sullenly. "Yes, before Swift-Walker's body was found I had noticed that Red-Sky no longer wore his knife, and after I heard of the killing I did indeed suspect that She-Bear was somehow responsible. I was not sure enough to accuse her directly, but my thought was that I might frighten her into confession. She eluded me, as she told you, and so all that was left was to go myself and try to find proof that my suspicion had been right."

"You took upon yourself authority that did not belong to you, Snow-Born," the Spirit-Sayer rebuked him. "If you had such suspicions, and any grounds for them, you should have come to me with them. The spirits do not approve of private vengeance. Now, She-Bear, did you kill Swift-Walker with the knife you stole?"

Red-Sky leaped up.

"What am I hearing?" he cried wildly. "Am I hearing that the woman for whom I paid He-Who-Dares so dearly was so bad a bargain? Are you telling me that Swift-Walker was invading my rights, and that the woman—whether in remorse or in fear of his threat to inform me if she refused him further, does not matter—then took from me my fine weapon and slew him with it? . . . It was my half brother I thought the thief."

"You fool!" exclaimed Snow-Born bitterly. "What had I to do with Swift-Walker? And have you become so old and besotted that you

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are the only one among us not to know that Swift-Walker had tried in vain to buy She-Bear from her father for himself?"

"I never considered him," grunted He-Who-Dares. "He had nothing to offer worth such a one as my daughter, beautiful and fat and surely fertile as she is."

There was stifled laughter; everybody knew He-Who-Dares for a greedy man.

The Spirit-Sayer raised his voice to a commanding shout.

"Be quiet, all of you! You are blaspheming against the spirits and against me as their spokesman, quarreling among yourselves even as I bring you their judgment. She-Bear, cease weeping and answer me in the fear of the High Gods. Are you guilty?"

Almost inaudibly, but firmly now, the girl spoke.

"I did not slay Swift-Walker. I did not steal Red-Sky's knife."

Bright-Morning, from his vantage point near his father, felt a thrill of surprise. He had been waiting with a mixture of excitement and revulsion for judgment to be made against She-Bear: would the Spirit-Sayer turn her over to Red-Sky, or would he himself perform the ritual punishment of death?

Yet now his father listened to her disclaimer without dispute. He said only, "Swift-Walker was a rash and stubborn youth. Many of us had observed how his desire was set upon you and how angered he was when He-Who-Dares sold you to Red-Sky instead of to him."

A shrill voice interrupted him.

"She bewitched my boy!" screeched White-Deer, the mother of Swift-Walker. "She laid an evil spell on him!"

"Silence!"

Horse-Slayer pulled his sister down and she sat muttering to herself.

The Spirit-Sayer went on, "Did you welcome Swift-Walker's desire? Would you have been pleased if your father had given you to him instead of to Red-Sky?"

"Would that matter?" asked She-Bear simply. "It is for a daughter to obey. And when I passed into Red-Sky's keeping it was my duty to bear his children if the High Gods so willed. I have followed always the God-given laws of our tribe."

"One law you did not follow, woman. I am your Spirit-Sayer, appointed to be your guide and counselor. You should have come to me for help against Snow-Born or any other. But you are a weak girl, confused and frightened. Now, before us all, in the safety of my protection, I enjoin you to tell us what happened between you and Swift-Walker on Festival Eve."

Not a sound could be heard from the gathered people. Even White-Deer's low lament was hushed. She-Bear summoned all her strength. She stood alone in a little space made by those who had involuntarily shrunk from her.

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"Late at night, when I lay alone in the hut, Swift-Walker awakened me. He seized hold of me roughly and laid his hand over my mouth so that I could not cry out. 'I have long wanted you and now I shall have you,' he said. Even if I had not been given to Red-Sky to be his woman, any feeling I might ever have had for Swift-Walker would have died within me after that.

"I struggled as best I could. I got one arm loose and stretched my hand under the skins of the bed, for that is where Red-Sky conceals his belongings of value, and I felt the handle of the knife. I am not sure whether I would have had the courage to thrust it into Swift-Walker's body. But I had no opportunity; he twisted my hand and snatched the weapon from me.

"But even so the High Gods took pity on me and protected me from the sin of disobedience to our laws. For then, holding the knife, Swift-Walker raised himself from me and stood a moment staring down at me in the half darkness. I was beyond outcry or attempted flight, too weak from terror to stir.

"He seemed like one possessed who suddenly has been freed of the demon. He made a strange sound, half groan, half sigh, and darted from the hut. I stumbled from the bed and I could see him running down the path that leads to the forest, the knife still in his hand. I never saw him again until his dead body was brought back for burial.

"The next day was the Summer Festival, and I saw Red-Sky among the dancers. I had time to call my thoughts together. I dared not tell Red-Sky what had happened; I dreaded the moment he would find his knife was gone. But he kept silent about his loss, to me as well as to others; I know now it was his half brother he blamed. And before I could make up my mind to speak, word came of the finding of Swift-Walker, dead. The rest you know."

A shiver ran through the throng of listeners. In the memory of the tribe no other of them had ever destroyed his own life.

But the Spirit-Sayer shook his head.

"Your story was well told, She-Bear," he said gently. "You learned your lesson well. But your story is not true. I believe that Swift-Walker crept to you in the night and seized you. And I believe that you reached beneath the bed and brought out the ptarmigan knife.

"But it was not Swift-Walker who wrested the knife from your grasp and ran to the forest with it. It is not in nature for a man inflamed with lust suddenly to feel remorse for no reason; only fear could drive off one in Swift-Walker's state of passion. And you did not see him take the path to the forest. The opening of Red-Sky's hut faces the other way.

She-Bear stood silently weeping again, her face in her hands.

The Spirit-Sayer's voice grew

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stern. "Now I will say what really happened.

"Only the dance leaders were with me in the cave on Festival Eve. Who among the other men had reason to worry and watch when Red-Sky was absent? Who did not sleep, but kept his eyes on Swift-Walker, and saw him rise and leave? That man followed him at a distance where he would not be seen, and when he came upon him he did indeed find She-Bear resisting attack.

"It was that man who caught up the knife. When Swift-Walker, unarmed, was startled and leaped up at his arrival, and saw in the half darkness who the invader was, he was terrified. He ran from the hut and sought to lose the other in the forest, for he knew well that even if he won a struggle he would bring down upon himself exposure and disgrace.

"The pursuer caught up with him deep in the dark forest, and they fought. Swift-Walker was younger and stronger and he beat down the other man, so that he was bent over his opponent with his throat exposed. Then the other must have seized his opportunity. He slashed with the ptarmigan knife, still in his hand, and Swift-Walker fell, dying or dead.

"The knife dropped as the victor got to his feet and in the darkness he could not find it; perhaps he did not know how easily it could be traced to its owner. This is midsummer, and dawn comes early; the killer had to get back to camp and to his hut before the sleepers began to wake at daylight."

The Spirit-Sayer paused. It was so still that the people seemed to have ceased even to breathe.

"She-Bear is indeed a good and obedient woman; she was so to her father and is so now to her man. What she was commanded to say if she should be accused, she did say. But only one man had cause and opportunity for what was done, and it was he who taught her what to answer.

"He-Who-Dares, come forward and stand before me!"

She-Bear's father jumped up and turned as if to flee. Two of his nearest neighbors caught him by the arms and dragged him to the cleared space between the Spirit-Sayer and the crowd. There he brushed them aside and raised his head.

"I was protecting my daughter," he said truculently.

"You were protecting your wealth, which has always meant more to you than all your children," the Spirit-Sayer retorted. "We all know your greed. You knew that if Swift-Walker succeeded in ravaging the girl and Red-Sky learned of it, he might cast her off and demand from you the return of what he had paid for her. She would have no value to you then, for she would be any man's for the taking.

"Your evil has found you out. Through the very weapon you

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used, the spirits have guided me to discover your guilt. You took the life of one of our own tribe, and for that life you must pay with your own.

"Hold him and bind him," he commanded the men who had brought He-Who-Dares forward and who still stood behind him. "When the sun rises tomorrow, He-Who-Dares must be slain according to our rites and customs.

"Red-Sky, you are to keep and care for She-Bear as before, without holding against her any blame or accusation; of her own will she has committed no offense against you. Snow-Born, you and your half brother will both do penance for your ill feeling to one another, to wipe out the possession by evil that has made dissension between brothers who should be loyal friends. . . . The ptarmigan knife I myself shall bury as tribute to the Gods.

"Go now, all of you, to your huts and resting places and cleanse yourselves and pray in preparation for tomorrow's sacrifice."

Turning, the Spirit-Sayer in all his regalia walked away while the people waited, not daring to move until he had left them. The old man touched Bright-Morning as he passed, and when the crowd had dispersed the youth followed his father's signal.

For a long time the Spirit-Sayer sat in his hut in silence. Then he sighed deeply and said, "This is not yet the end. Tomorrow I must preside over the ritual slaying of He-Who-Dares—who was one of my own puberty group. The people will not soon forget. They will obey me, but that will not erase this trouble as if it had never existed.

"I must watch that Red-Sky does not harbor ill will against either She-Bear or Snow-Born; that Snow-Born represses his resentment of his half brother if he cannot overcome it; that Horse-Slayer and White-Deer do not plot against She-Bear because they blame her unjustly for Swift-Walker's death. It is a heavy responsibility to be the Spirit-Sayer of our tribe."

"But you will succeed, my father," said Bright-Morning confidently. "I know well that it was through you alone that the spirits revealed the true events of this great mystery. What none of us could understand by human reason was made plain to you who are under the guardianship of the holy powers."

The Spirit-Sayer smiled slightly.

"My son," he said slowly, "I have great hopes that when my time is over it will be you who will take up my office. You are learning from me to paint and model the animal likenesses that will reward our hunters, to receive my knowledge of our songs and dances and our secret rites. You are very young still, but I can see already that you have skill and thoughtfulness beyond mine when I was your age

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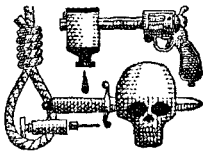
and under instruction from the Spirit-Sayer of my own youth.

"So today I shall tell you the first of the high secret sayings, which you will keep in your own heart and ponder over and never tell and never forget.

"Remember this, my son: for their peace of mind the weak and ignorant need to believe that when the Spirit-Sayer consults the sacred objects, the spirits reveal to him directly the truth he seeks. But it is not so. All the spirits can do is enable him to use the understanding that sets man above all lesser beings.

"The spirits work solely through the intelligence of man. *I myself* reasoned out the truth of the murder of Swift-Walker."



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Buying and selling all these years had taught him a few things—about things . . .

THE BARGAIN HUNTER

by APRIL AARONS

THIS IS A TAPE RECORDING. I'D considered buying one of these tape gadgets before, but I didn't want to spend the money. You know how it is—a penny saved is a penny earned. Not that I'm frugal, but so often these days it seems that things are *expensive*. You look in the newspapers and they want a couple of hundred dollars for just a plain ordinary television set—no fancy woodwork or anything. Just an ordinary set that must cost peanuts to put together, what with those cheap components that come in from overseas.

I keep telling Marie, my wife, that I just won't pay the markup those crooks in the stores ask. No, indeed, I tell her, we'll get a television set one of these days—but not now. The same holds true for the new stove she's been wanting. One of these days—but not now.

Of course, Marie whines a lot. For instance, she says she can't feed two people on the fifteen dollars a week I give her. Ridiculous! I'm a plain man, always have been. No need to eat steak when liver is cheap.

I'll tell you what: Marie is young. Twenty-one years younger than me and incapable of knowing the value of a dollar. I try to teach her, but she gets rebellious. Runs around the house crying, and stamps her feet and yells at me.

She'll get sore about this tape recorder. Well, the thing is: I saw in the paper where this young couple was advertising to sell some household goods and I figured maybe I would buy Marie a stove if they would sell me theirs for no more than forty dollars. They had the nerve to ask sixty-five and wouldn't come down. No sale!

Nice enough couple. Young. Little baby. The husband had been drafted. He had worked days, gone to school at night. Now the wife wants to go live with her parents so that her mother can take care of the baby while she works.

Healthy-looking girl. Ought to be hard-working. I know how to pick hired help. At the store I look first at the girls' legs—not to ogle them but to make sure they are sturdy. Never hire a salesgirl with spindly legs. Can't last a month—they get too tired.

Maybe I'll write a book some day

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—I've learned a few things after thirty successful years in yard goods, notions, and ladies' wear. Shouldn't pass out good advice for free—so I'll put it in a book and make some money.

But this tape recorder I have beside me on the seat of my car—it was sitting just a couple of hours ago on the kitchen table in that young couple's house. After I found out they wanted too much for their stove, I was ready to walk out the door. I was in a hurry, because I had to pick up my car at the repair shop and it was a four-block walk. Inconvenient. But what can you do when the crooks in Detroit won't keep parts in stock for a decent length of time, and you have to deal with the one garage in town that carries parts that no one else has?

But as soon as I saw the tape recorder I knew I could make a deal with those kids—they were nervous and worried. They hadn't sold anything. They'd put up for sale a carpet, a dinette set, a stove, and two easy chairs. They'd put hand-lettered signs on each item with the prices they wanted. I could see in their eyes that business was bad. Buying and selling all these years has taught me a few things—I can almost smell an eager seller.

So I said, "How much do you want for that old tape gadget?"

Wasn't really old, but you have to be cagey when you're after something.

The boy said, "We're not going to sell it."

His wife gave a little gasp.

I asked him, "Why are you hanging on to it?"

He said, "I use it for my schoolwork."

I said, "Are you going to let it sit for years while you're in the service? Let it deteriorate?"

His wife was clenching and unclenching her hands.

I said, "I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

I knew it was worth one hundred. I'd seen models like it advertised in the newspapers.

The girl grabbed her husband and took him aside. I could tell *she* was being realistic. Otherwise, I would just have left the house and walked over to the garage. The man who runs the place is difficult: he overcharges me. I don't care *what* the going rate is for a good mechanic—I should not have to pay for the time a man spends just looking for parts for my car.

Well, I wanted that tape recorder bad, so I waited for the kids to thrash it out. The baby started crying in the next room, and the father winced. No wonder. Babies cost money. I keep telling Marie that and she yells some and says she still wants to have a child. I tell her it would be okay if the law let me work the kids at the store; but lazy lawmakers have to do something for their salaries, so they pass laws telling a man how to run

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his own family. When they change the laws, I tell Marie, that's when we'll have a family.

The boy came back and said I could have the tape recorder. I gave him cash and he gave me a receipt. I don't write checks if I don't have to: the banks have a service charge for every check you write—it's *your* money and they charge you!

I tell you, the world gets more crooked every day.

I said goodbye to those kids and took the tape recorder. Before I left I wished the boy good luck. Just plain courtesy—although it's a sin what our National Budget has climbed up to. That boy will eat better in the service than Marie and I do at home.

But I made a good deal on the tape recorder. I must waste three-quarters of an hour every day at the store telling the girls not to make so many mistakes. I never have enough hours in the day. Two big invoices came in a couple of weeks ago with the usual two percent discount if paid in ten days. Because I was pushed for time I laid them aside. Yesterday I found them and the ten days were already up. Two percent lost!

Time is money. Now I'll talk about the girls' mistakes into the tape recorder while I'm driving my car. I'll set the tape recorder on a counter in the store and play the tape before we open the store in the morning. I'll make a new tape every day, and have more time for my account books.

It's criminal to lose perfectly legitimate discounts!

I got to the garage just about closing time and I could see that the young mechanic I spoke to did not like the questions I asked him. He kept looking at the clock on the wall. I wanted to tell him that five o'clock is a ridiculous hour for a strong young man to quit working every day. But he's pretty rude to me. He takes more kindly to Marie. Sometimes she comes with me to town to shop and get gasoline; and I know that he was sweet on her once. I hear he told her he might buy into the garage if he could get some capital. But Marie knew that a husband with a house, a car, and a prosperous store was a better deal than a young guy who refused to work past five o'clock even on weekdays.

So I simply asked him how much each part cost and how long it took him to do the job. Then I paid, in cash, and I told the garage owner that I didn't want any more trouble with my car for at least a year. He told me what did I expect: the car is fourteen years old. I said Detroit is full of crooks and he told me I could go elsewhere if I didn't like his work. He said I was a cheap skinflint.

I wonder if there's some kind of libel law—where a man can collect money if another man calls him names.

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I turned on the tape recorder as soon as I left the garage and it ran pretty good. There's a little clip-on microphone which I attached to my jacket pocket, so I can talk and drive at the same time. It will take me about ten minutes to get home, just long enough to check a reel of tape. We live right across the county line. It's a little far out but the real-estate taxes are lower.

This is a swell time to really test this gadget because there's a thunderstorm coming up—I can see the clouds over the hill up ahead. In a storm I can check how well my voice gets picked up and plays back.

I feel kind of like a radio announcer. I wonder how much money they make. I hear some of them do pretty well. Pure foolishness, paying a man a lot of money just for talking!

This gadget will amaze the girls down at the store. Of course if they'd just listen to me I wouldn't have to talk so much. But all they do is sulk. And quit. Then I have to spend money to put another ad in the newspaper.

The rain has started to come down. That's good for Marie's vegetable garden, and saves on my water bill.

Now I'm at the top of the hill and I can see our house down below. Marie has turned on the lights in the living room. I'll have to tell her—again!—that twilight is not early enough to put house lights on. There's still plenty of good daylight left, even with the rain coming down.

Say, I knew that young mechanic back at the garage was acting kind of funny! I can't slow down on this hill! My brakes don't seem to work and it's all his fault.

I'm still talking and the tape recorder is still rolling. But to keep it from sliding to the floor I have to hold it with one hand and steer my car with the other hand.

Maybe I can sell this tape to a radio station—for some human-interest program. But if I let go of the tape recorder to pull my hand brake, the recorder will fall to the floor and get damaged.

I'm going too fast for this hill and I can't control my car. That young mechanic didn't do his job right. Just now I let go of the tape recorder and held it in place with my knee. It didn't fall to the floor. It's still running.

But now the hand brake doesn't work, either!

I tell you, there's just no one in this world you can trust any more to do an honest job—just no one

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HONORABLE MENTION

in the* CWA *contest

RHONA PETRIE

Meet a brash, brisk, brainy operator who calls himself Justin. He is waiting for Paula Ingram when she leaves Holloway prison, and after that it's a tense waiting game—cat and mouse, ploy and counterploy, action mounting and excitement pressure-cooking until the smashing climax . . .

WHAT WE'RE ALL HOOKED ON

by RHONA PETRIE

I SAT IN THE LITTLE GREEN TRUCK and waited for the gates to open. At 8:03 exactly a small gap appeared in the grim mock-castle frontage and two women stepped out. In the rear-view mirror I watched them move to the edge of the pavement, grasping their brown-paper parcels, heard the old Humber Imperial rev up and bound across the intervening space, screech to a slobbering halt in front of them. And then it was all squawks of Cockney greeting, hugs and smacking kisses all round.

"Hey, Bert, this is a bit of all right!"

" 'Ullo, old darlings. Long *time* no see, eh?"

"Ow, shuddup, Ted. That's a dirty word to start with. I'n't 'e a 'orror?"

Shrieks as the rear doors were pulled open. "Cor! Mind the booze, duck. Look a' it! Crates and crates of darling old Guinness!"

The two women tumbled inside in a gale of excited laughter, slammed the doors. One rolled down a window and leaned out to make a short sharp gesture at the receding prison gates.

The third woman, who had come out behind them, still stood there undecided. I took a quick look at the photograph of a smiling, dark-haired beauty and slid it back in my pocket. Basically the same face. The bones below might still be lovely, but time had added a superstructure of sourness and withdrawal. A silent woman. And my instructions were to get her talking!

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She was in a queer mood, but I'd expected that. We had our means of finding out how she'd reacted inside. A quick spasm of movement flickered on her face, then it was straight again, flat and dead. Too many emotions suppressed for too many bleak years. Now they all wanted out at once and she dared not allow it. The chances were almost zero that she'd fall in with my plans, but I had to try, and to make first contact and then go along with her, playing it by ear all the way.

She started trailing along the pavement, holding her package of possessions distastefully by one corner. Well, there was something for a start.

I drew gently past, put an arm out the window, tweaked the parcel from her fingers. A dozen yards farther on there was a litter basket on the lamp standard. I cruised to a stop and crammed it in, settled back to wait for her to come level with me.

She still had the same dispirited way of walking, but with something else now in the tilt of her head, a sort of measured defiance. She came alongside and stared hard at me.

"Paula!" I said. She didn't react immediately. It would be long enough since she'd heard herself called that. No, she'd been Ingram from the moment they'd first charged her, and a long impersonal number ever since.

She was trying to see through the dark glasses to my eyes. Curiosity now; well, she was coming alive. I flicked the black lenses away for a moment and looked at her directly. Then I brushed back the dark Beatle shock of hair and let her glimpse the fair crop underneath. "You know me," I said.

"I don't!"

The comeback was immediate this time, but she looked at me again from the corner of her eyes, as though considering, wondering if sometime, somewhere, we could have brushed against each other.

"Please yourself," I said shortly. "Look, I just do what I'm told. Like you should. Get in."

The habit of obedience was strong. She hardly hesitated, but slid in beside me with a quick glance across her shoulder at the suitcases in the back.

"That's better," I told her. "You've got a busy day ahead."

She was trying to give nothing away, concentrating on taking everything in, waiting for something. This was the point where I could so easily make a false move and I'd have lost her completely. But through the suspicion and the wariness there was something else awakening in her that was mighty like satisfaction. The way she opened and closed her fingers on her knees was the cat's-paw movement that goes so often with a purr.

"Who sent you?" she murmured, testing me. I gave her a smile.

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"Ah, well," I said. "Who would?"

A sudden flush broke across her cheeks and stained slowly down her neck. She looked quickly away from me, a hand to her eyes. At the next traffic light we drew up by a glossy car and she was trying unobtrusively to see herself reflected in its door.

She turned to me and said in a rush, "I came out a day early. They put it forward, so how—"

A lazy smile. "We got to hear of that too."

With growing excitement she started looking about her, noticing familiar landmarks, buildings that had changed since she'd gone inside. "Chelsea," she breathed. "Shall we be going along the Embankment?"

"Not yet. First things first."

She turned to take another look at the suitcases. "Are they . . . ?"

"For clothes, m'm." I grinned at her, one of my lopsided specials. "I guess I forgot your Guinness!"

She almost smiled back.

We pulled in to the curb just off the King's Road and I helped her out, dumping the little vanity case beside her. The hem of her old-fashioned winter coat came halfway down her calves. She was going to get some shocks in the next few minutes.

King's Road stunned her. The midsummer heat wave had brought out a rash of dresses like frilled bikinis. Diamond-shaped vistas of flesh from lobster through all shades of red and brown to genuine Nigerian black were playing peekaboo at midriff and center back. There were diminutive skirts that were little more than flounced G-strings; complete sets of vertebrae undulating between panels of jazz-printed organza; the longest (perhaps too the knobbiest) legs in Europe, glinting in gold net nylons; brief tabards as straight as an ice-cream wafer; violent oranges, yellows, raspberry pinks clamoring to shout each other down. London swinging fit to burst along the bad, mad King's Road.

I drew Paula Ingram gently past the stock Chelsea scene and through the doorway of Samantha's Boutique. We slipped under the sequined curtain at the back, squeezed past a sinkful of used coffee beakers and up the wooden stairs to the first floor.

Samantha is one of those bloodless, horrifyingly hairy zombies who drift between Sloane Square and the Shepherds Bush studios. She peered out now from a torrent of near-white crowning glory and pharaohesque eye make-up.

"Transformation scene," I ordered and nodded to show I was leaving Paula to it. I had the greatest confidence in Samantha's ability. It was only on herself that her sense of style went awry. She could dress any girl to look any part, and at the same time convince her that was her own special style. She had

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too a less endearing trait of unloading her most expensive gear first.

I went across the road to phone Hardy before I could get any estimate of what all this was going to cost him.

"Yes, yes," I assured him. "All going according to plan." He'd know as well as I did that there was no real plan.

"What has she told you?" he demanded. "Has she started talking yet?"

"No-o. Just lets me string her along, doesn't give."

"Well, who the hell does she think you are?"

"No idea," I confessed.

"And who's supposed to have sent you to meet her?"

"No notion—except on one thing, Hardy: that she's made up her own mind on that for certain. It's a man, and she's convinced she's going to see him soon. I'll just have to wait till she gets impatient and lets out his name. But you can bet on one thing—that somewhere there's someone who owes her a living and she can't wait to start collecting."

Hardy was dissatisfied. Well, he always is. He hasn't the patience for feeling his way when the going is slow. I can do it when I have to, though action is my Number One relish. All the same, I have a nose for pace, and that's what has made me so useful to the Group, brought me in the lucre while Hardy organizes his ulcer from a desk at half my screw and perks.

And now I decided to hot up the pace just a little. I transferred one suitcase from the truck to the Rolls, took the other, empty, back with me to the Boutique to hold Sam's version of a swinging trousseau.

I would have taken off my hat to Sam for an impressive piece of work. As it was, I walked all round the new Paula Ingram, then lifted my Beatle wig in lieu. From the neck down Ingram was brand-new exotica, and above it she already exhibited embarrassed impatience over her own skin and hair.

"Beautician next," I reassured her. "Bond Street, no less, in twenty minutes."

She answered with a funny little twist of her mouth. "You've got it all worked out, haven't you?"

I took it soberly. "You could say there's been time enough to make plans. I don't want to rush you, Paula, but you have this appointment. And after your face and hairdo we're lunching at the Europa."

Suppressed excitement and anxiety mixed in her voice as she asked, "Just the two of us?"

"For the present." I grinned at her, patted her hand. Sam was folding clothes into the open suitcase. I saw a yellow and white striped trouser suit, something of pink Thai silk with a wide band of silver.

Sam's hands stopped moving. "Know what?" she demanded. "You ought to go blonde. With skin that pale you ought to do it properly. Buttermilk blonde, why not?"

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She folded significantly a purple shift with little curly white feathers at the hem, lovingly tilted it so that light spilled down the fabric like a sheet of water.

Sam is a professional, as I am. I began to feel just a little bit sorry for Miss Paula Ingram.

"Your suit's through there," said Sam to me and nodded I went through and made a quick change, left a bundle of notes inside the scruffy wig. Deposit on the finery, repayable in part when the stuff came back—when the waiting game was over.

We went downstairs, round the corner into the sunlight, and I handed Paula Ingram into the Rolls-Royce. She sat erect, like a queen coming into her own, except for the poor little hollowed-out face and the streaks of gray in her wispy hair. Her eyes were burning at everything she turned them on—the sleek enamel, the gleaming dashboard, dove-gray upholstery, my dark suit, discreet tie, and Guards Officer bowler. She nearly put out a hand to touch me.

"What do I call you?" she asked, almost afraid.

I told her. "Justin," she repeated. "It suits you."

It should. I'd chosen it as carefully as the rest of the outfit.

I deposited her at the temple to beauty. At 12:50 she walked up to me in the Europa lounge, in full warpaint, a buttermilk blonde, immaculately back-combed. I knew her only by the dress.

All through the *hors d'oeuvres* and the *Caneton à l'Orange* I skated on the thin ice of innuendo. She built up well. She was doing it all herself now. With the *Ananas au Kirsch* I squeezed her hand under the table. The waiter kept busy with her wine glass and then brought Grand Marnier with the coffee.

"I'll not toast the Queen," I told her softly over the edge of mine. "She's had you at her pleasure for too long. But here's to a girl who knows how to wait. May she get what she deserves in the end."

Paula sat, eyes closed in ecstasy, tears glistening at the edge of her artistically tinted lashes. She drew a breath, fought against powerful emotion. "It was worth it. All those lost years, just for today, this morning, *knowing* . . ."

"Nothing's too good for you, Paula."

She nodded.

I laughed quietly. "What else did you expect?"

She might have put it into words then, what I'd seen in her hunched shoulders when she stepped through Holloway's gate; but she'd come a long way in the six hours since then, and pride was reinforced with eighty quid of clothes and cosmetics. Her back stiffened.

"I always knew," she said with conviction. nearly enough to have even me believing in it, "he'd keep his word."

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I drove her to the little flat we'd borrowed for the job—over a high-class florist's off South Audley Street. All the opulence of Mayfair at midsummer just within reach of the long open windows, purring by below in Bentleys and Cadillacs, the expensive breath of West End hauteur barely stirring the fine net curtains.

She lay back on the bed, stretched her fingertips to its edge, sighed, and began to dream, half awake. I ran my fingers over her hair, her face, making her sigh and smile again. She wouldn't need me to rock her to sleep.

"When will he come?" she murmured, opening her eyes. "When will he come?"

"Who?" I teased.

She closed her eyes again, smiled into the pillow. Then she looked up, square into my watching face, and spoke his name. Shyly first, then louder. Again and again triumphantly until her head fell back and her voice trailed sleepily away.

I pulled the sheet up and hid her vulnerable hands—the short nails that would take months to grow and acquire the elegance of the rest of her—padded in my socks to the next room, lifted the receiver, dialed Hardy again.

"Maury," I told him. "His name's Maury. What's in a name and where the hell does it get us? Ring me back here with anything on him. She should be out cold for a couple of hours."

Paula Ingram, convicted embezzler, slept the deep sleep of satiety and hope. I lounged in the next room while the afternoon traffic streamed in and out of London's West End with the preoccupation of the overorganized ant colony it is. Money, I thought, is what it works by; money is what we're all hooked on. Money is what gives the clapped-out, long-term prisoner her fat cat, bowl-of-cream smile. Money is what it's all about. So then, where in the name of Midas did all the money go?

Paula Ingram had once been a nice young woman, well educated, well turned-out, well enough liked if it came to that, but fastidious. So fastidious that it seemed unlikely she'd have fallen either for money or for the man who must have taken it from her and left her holding the empty bag.

It all happened well before my time, but I'd read through the case so often I knew the way it had gone. She had accepted it quietly, as though prosecution was the obvious next step and her conviction the logical conclusion. The jury, because of her disinclination to defend herself, had seen it in much the same way. It was only afterward that her silence seemed to echo strangely. No associates unmasked, no money recovered, no defense arranged, no distress registered—or so it seemed.

And the negatives were too many. No visitors at Holloway, no letters written to or by her, apart

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from those arising purely from legal considerations. And I'd seen her when she came out—no friends to meet her, no impatience, no plans.

Yet now Paula Ingram slept the deep sleep of satiety and hope. She had taken little persuading that someone owed her a living, because somewhere there *was* someone who ought to feel that obligation. His name was Maury and she thought he still loved her. Now, how to persuade her that he didn't?

Hardy phoned about four. Maury was a blameless, middle-aged stick-in-the-mud nephew of old Dame Alice's. Owned a garage off Baker Street. He had never featured in the case.

Up till now, I told Hardy; but he wasn't sold on Maury as a suspect. He had a very modest allowance from the old lady and no better prospect of inheriting than five other assorted nephews and nieces who made up the second rank behind a favored stepson. Now, if it could have been the stepson, well . . . Sure I hadn't heard her say Johnny instead? No, I told him. Maury she'd said and Maury we were stuck with.

I heard Hardy tapping his pencil between his teeth. Next second he'd draw breath and call the hunt off.

"Hold it," I whispered urgently, made a shuffling movement with my feet, then said swiftly, "I'll call back."

I slipped the receiver back on its rest. That should give me time enough to think where all this was getting us. Nowhere maybe, as Hardy suspected. Just another dead end. And yet I had a feeling . . .

I tried it from a new angle. Dear old doddery Dame Alice with her efficient little bookkeeper-secretary and the unspectacular, unappreciated nephew. He wasn't likely to inherit much, nor soon. The old lady was singularly tenacious of life, even today at 93. Was Maury so impatient for the money that he persuaded Paula to get it for him in advance? Is that why it never showed up in Paula's estate—because she'd passed it on to her lover?

Now go a little further back in time—to the jewel theft three years before. That's where my own interest really started; that was what the Group was really concerned with—getting back the £50,000 they'd paid in insurance—or, alternatively, the gems.

Lightning's not supposed to strike the same place twice, but to a professional like me Dame Alice looked to be rigged for full pyrotechnic exploitation. First, her jewelry disappears, then she springs a leak in the books. Paula had paid for the second, but there'd been no evidence that she'd had any interest in the first job. Two different techniques of roguery, two separate villains. That was the logic of it, but still one wonders at the coincidence of the dates—that the em-

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bezzlement began just a month after the burglary.

Not only had the gems not reappeared where one would expect them but, too, there had been no whisper abroad that the best-known stones were being recut and reset. Despite the Group's offer of a dizzy reward for information, the fences I had contact with remained as intrigued and puzzled by the vanishing act as were the police. Someone, it seemed, was sitting on the hoard because he didn't have the means to unload. Amateurism, in fact.

Suppose, now, Maury had lifted the jewels. Impatience, greed, and recklessness might have combined to spur him to this single trial of crime. Up to a point it was a lucky break—the thief had got clear and left no clue to his identity. Or if a clue was left, then it had not been spotted by the police.

Paula was on hand at the time. Had she found out who the burglar was? Had she held this knowledge over his head, discussed it with him, finally suggested a more direct way of getting their hands on money? Had Maury become the route by which Paula cleared the amounts she suppressed from the accounts? If so, how would he have repaid her? With only promises and the appearance of affection?—or would the little businesswoman have demanded some security against the personal risks she was running? Could this security have been the stolen gems? Had she stashed them in some place only she knew, and could we expect them to start reappearing now that she was released?

All I had to build this on was an abbreviated name, a pennyworth of facts, and a king's ransom of "ifs." None of this would have come to light but for Paula's single slip that exposed the lengthy fraud, for Dame Alice had raked in the insurance and spread it afresh, not in gems but throughout her caravan-camp empire. She'd put it in land and drainage and social amenities, clubhouses, gambling shops, camps and motels. It had been spread so wide that it never showed. And it never showed as it drained away again, that £50,000 and as much again.

I went into the kitchenette and put on a kettle for some tea. The phone rang shrilly and I hared back, not wanting Paula wakened yet. As I lifted the receiver I heard a movement in the next room; something knocked to the floor, like a brush or a shoe.

"Listen," Hardy breathlessly demanded. "There may be something. Maury's dead. Larry, did you get that?"

I got it. I also got Paula's face through the open doorway, radiant with expectation.

"How?" I demanded. "When?"

"Hit-and-run driver. Came right over the pavement at him. Ten

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thirty this morning, corner by St. George's Hospital. They took him straight in, but he died in less than twenty minutes, unconscious throughout. Five conflicting descriptions of the driver, but all agree it was a man. The car turned up about two o'clock in a street off Sloane Square. Scotland Yard are treating it as hit-and-run, but they don't completely rule out murder." Hardy hiccoughed slightly, as he was liable to do if he got excited too soon after drinking tea. "Try working on that, Larry."

I put the receiver down and turned my back on the woman.

"That was Maury. Wasn't it?"

"No. No, it wasn't." The kettle saved me—one of the whistling kind. She followed me into the kitchenette and got in the way while I shuffled crockery round a tray. I made up my mind quickly, carried the tray into the sitting room, and added to it a bottle of whiskey from the bar.

"I don't want any," she said, pushing her cup away.

"Drink it," I ordered. "You're going to need it. That was bad news. The worst, I'm afraid. Maury's dead. Somebody got him this morning."

I don't know how I'd expected her to take it—hysteria, incredulity, or Victorian vapors. What she did was hiss, like a startled tortoise, and draw her head down between hunched shoulders. Then she stared up at me fixedly, reading and probing and coldly hating me. I knew at once what she'd seen—my eagerness at the news, when Maury's violent end had confirmed for me his importance in the scheme. Well, I *was* pleased he'd been done in. But I shouldn't have let her see that. It put me right outside.

"What happened?" she asked in a dead voice.

"Hit-and-run. An accident at Hyde Park Corner. Police found the car abandoned." Better not mention they suspected murder. She might even think I'd had some hand in planning it.

"Why?"she demanded abruptly. "Why *today?"*

She didn't wait for an answer, straightening and turning for the bedroom door. I caught the quick flash of her eyes as she worked out an answer for herself. *Because today she came out. And I'd been keeping her out of the way while sombody else got Maury settled for good and all.*

"I have to think," she mumbled, backed away, and shut the door between us. Well, so must I. The longer she took coming round to see sense, the longer I'd have to think up a new way to make her talk. Let her think it out, sleep it off, or whatever.

I gave her forty minutes. Before phoning Hardy again, I decided to look in and make sure she was asleep. She'd fixed a chair under the

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door handle. It meant going out on the little balcony and then climbing along the ledge that passed her window. That was how I found the gutterpipe pulled loose.

I looked down on the little patio and saw the ruined hydrangea where she'd jumped from the sill. I climbed back in and phoned Hardy with the double message that Paula was on the loose and I was a first-class fool. He accepted the second part without any persuasion.

"What now?" he demanded.

"I go after her. She may go straight to Maury's place to check up. It's lucky I'm the only one who'll recognize her as she is now. Unless she talks, she should be safe enough from whoever got Maury."

"You're still convinced his death was deliberate?"

"Murder, yes. Planned for today so that he couldn't meet Paula, because whoever killed Maury didn't know Paula would be released a day early. Someone's going to be there tomorrow to meet her. Me too—at eight a.m. I'll be waiting by Holloway gates again. I'll fix up a substitute and follow them. Samantha has her old gear and she'll find us a stand-in for Paula."

"Tell me what you want us to do," said Hardy.

"I'll phone in a list later. For the moment there's one thing I need to know. What was Maury doing when Paula made that slip that gave her away? Not at the time she was convicted, mind. Before that. Because it may be something Maury did that got her so rattled she was caught off guard."

"I've got that," said Hardy. "He wasn't around during the trial. Involved some months before in a car accident. Got his hands and face badly burned. Out of circulation for several months, then came back with a patchwork face. Plastic surgery. It seemed to have knocked all the life out of him, they say, but that might partly have been shock at Paula's conviction."

The germ of an idea wriggled in my mind. I transferred it to an incubation cell while I pursued the date detail. "I want the exact time and place of the accident, hospital data and all; also, estimated date of Paula's fatal mistake in the books. It looks as though Maury's accident shook Paula out of her accustomed efficiency."

Hardy sighed. "I still don't go for this Maury-Paula angle. We've been looking into the garage business. He has a lot of overhead, barely makes it pay. The money never went into that."

"It wouldn't—not with clever little Paula planning it all. The narrow profit of the garage is a case of traveling light—less to lose when they drop it and run."

"Only Maury won't be doing any running any more."

"M'm. But I must. Be ringing in later."

I had quite an evening. First I

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took a taxi to Baker Street and spent ten minutes learning the layout of the late Maury's garage. No sign of Paula doing a similar rec, but I did recognize a familiar pair of sharp shoulders bent over a ledger in the office. It was Rory Thomson poking his saturnine nose into Maury's financial affairs.

"Good evening, Superintendent."

He gave me his usual dark, withering stare and grunted. Then he leaned back, lifting shaggy brows. "But the laddie in question wasn't insured at all. Now where do you come in, eh?"

"I don't exactly come in. Just passing by, you might say. I wondered if I'd met the deceased before. Do you think I could see him?"

It didn't fool the wily Scot for a second. He switched on his bleak smile and uncoiled from the chair. "Why not?"

We hailed another taxi to go and view the body and, as ever, Thomson was pleased to let me to pay.

"No," I said, making it sound regretful. "I've never seen this one before. Have you any spare photos?"

Superintendent Thomson snorted. "Is it mine you're after, autographed? I understood this laddie's no concern of yours?"

But he hadn't said no, and no is by far his favorite word. I grinned back. "Always willing to help," I offered. "I could sort of show it around, see if anyone knew him."

"Humph! I doubt he was disreputable enough to be known to friends of yours, laddie. However, it does so happen—"

"Has *he* had any other visitors?" I asked the morgue attendant.

"Only his wife, an hour back. Came by herself." The man made her aloneness sound slightly indelicate.

"Interesting," said Thomson with narrowed eyes. "The man was supposedly a bachelor."

We learned on questioning that the lady had been thin, pale, and very blonde. The attendant described in some detail the dress in which Sam had decked out Paula.

The photograph was an improvement on the actual dead face, even rearranged as it had been by experts. I phoned Hardy, got the address of the nursing home where Maury had been treated, and took a fast train down from Waterloo.

The Matron remembered the patient. After a little nominal reluctance she handed me the file. I made a few notes, thanked her politely, and set off happily back to London.

I decided to camp out at the flat I'd borrowed for Paula, checked by phone the arrangements for the next morning, and slept the sleep of the conscienceless, untroubled by dreams of Paula, homeless and without funds, sleeping out in a park or railway station. I guessed I'd be seeing her soon enough—and in that I was right.

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She was three streets short of Holloway when they picked her up. Hardy radioed through to tell me while I was sitting it out in the truck again. I don't imagine she was delighted to "go along with them," as Scotland Yard so informally phrases it. I'd had to reveal her friendship with Maury in order to get Superintendent Thomson interested in her, implying she knew all there was to know about the hit-and-run victim. But I hadn't mentioned how we'd spent most of the previous day together. Paula too, I thought, would probably choose to stay silent. In any case, Thomson had put out a call for me too.

My present concern was to watch for the substitute Paula. Again Sam had done a good job. The girl looked the right age, the right size, the right coloring. Paula's winter coat, reaching down her calves, gave me the strange impression that time had gone back a day.

She appeared at the gate after a large truck had obscured it in reversing. We had foreknowledge that no genuine prisoners would be coming through today.

Not so the driver of the dark red Riley. He never doubted for a second that she'd come through that gate, brown-paper parcel and all. The long Riley purred alongside the woman. The driver's brown, bearded face and her wan one turned to each other. He bent forward, lips moving, and her hand went swiftly to her mouth, her eyes widened, and she seemed to falter. Then the door of the passenger seat swept open. The girl hesitated, looked down at her package, then came slowly near the car and stepped in.

Whoever she was, this anonymous friend of Sam's, she had guts and she could act. I prayed fervently she could do it well enough to prevent his suspecting the switch and making some desperate move.

While I radioed Hardy, the Riley got under way and our second car moved quietly on his tail. I was thankful the bearded man hadn't disposed of her parcel, as I'd done with Paula's. It had one of our latest miniature transmitters inside and Hardy became piqued if any of them were lost.

I left the girl to whatever was coming and went to answer Thomson's call.

It was a question of stonewalling, with the outward appearance of cooperation. The Group, I said, had information that Paula Ingram and the late run-over Maury were more than passing acquaintances. Surely her visit to the morgue had confirmed this.

Thomson turned back to the unblinking girl. "Why did you say you were his widow?"

She shrugged. "To get in, obviously." She saw the next question coming and beat him to it. "No, I'm not married—to him or to anyone else. I've told you how it was. I was

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a little sweet on him a few years ago, not that he noticed me. When I heard about the accident I was sorry. Thought I'd pay my last respects. He had been a kind sort of person, not arrogant like the rest of the family."

Thomson smiled his nasty smile. "And *how* did you hear of the accident? Your visit beat the evening papers by a clear twenty minutes."

"I told her," I said.

At that point Thomson started getting very mean indeed but, feeling my way as I went, and watching for the least flicker on Paula's face, I gave him a version of yesterday's meeting.

"Know Sam's Boutique in King's Road, Superintendent? That's where I ran into Miss Ingram. She was choosing a dress—the one she has on now. Check with the label if you're doubtful. I'd never seen her before but her face was familiar from photos. Her clothes gave me the date clue and bingo—"

Thomson sneered. "Time?" he demanded.

I made it as late as I could. "But I hadn't heard about the accident then. It was when Hardy and I were on the phone just before lunch. You see, I'd dated Miss Ingram for one o'clock at the Europa. She couldn't be expected to celebrate alone, after all."

"Celebrate a death?" asked Thomson drily.

"It was her coming-out party."

Thomson leaned back and spilled cigarette ash down his linen jacket. "All very coincidental, laddie. It has a nasty smell."

It was then that Hardy phoned. I heard his urgent yapping as Thomson took up the receiver.

"Superintendent? Hardy. Listen, just listen—"

Thomson waved me over and we shared the phone. A girl's voice, little more than a whisper. She sounded terrified but she was trying hard to get a grip on herself. She didn't know the street's name but described the way they'd reached it. She was locked in the basement of Number 94. There were bars on the window and the man had threatened her. He said he'd kill her if she didn't tell him where the jewels were and now she could hear him coming back down the stairs. She'd have to explain she wasn't Paula—

The voice ceased abruptly.

"No," I shouted. "It's fatal!" Hardy's voice was also bellowing on the other end, but we got no reply.

"She had a radio—" I started telling Thomson. "This girl was—"

"Shut up! Hardy, you there? *You* tell me. I can't believe anything this puppy of yours says . . .You *what?* Instead of the real Ingram, you say? . . . Right!"

He reached over his desk and buzzed. A door burst open and a beefy young man bounded in.

"Get a car," roared Thomson, "Notting Hill district."

"Can I—?"

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"Yes, laddie. I'll need you." He looked sharply across at Paula Ingram who sat uncomprehendingly, staring at him. "And I think we'll take Madam, too."

I nodded. "Confrontation, yes."

"Let's move then. We don't want to miss anything!"

What we missed was the bearded man. Both he and the dark red Riley had fled the scene.

The girl was there, still warm, lying crumpled in front of an old gas cooker. You could read the scene like a book—the door left wide open, two cups with coffee stains on the table, a saucepan with milk scum clinging to its sides on a gas ring. There were even little gobs of slimy milk on her hair where he'd bent her back over the cooker when he strangled her. Beside her was the torn brown-paper wrapping of her parcel and the smashed remains of the little transmitter.

I touched the wispy hair and talcum dusted off on my fingers where she'd added a streak of gray. The dark lines of greasepaint had started to run where the artificial wrinkles had been smudged. Underneath, she was little more than a child.

Thomson pushed Paula closer. "Take a good look," he told her. "That was meant for you."

She started babbling. All the suppressed emotions of years came suddenly cascading out—the fears and pains and jealousies, the mistrust and the awful doubts that had fed themselves on the lack of news from outside. And in the chaos of her hysteria came the facts that Thomson was after.

He never cautioned her, for she was guilty of little she hadn't already paid for. When she had finished she put her head on my shoulder and moaned softly.

"We'll get him, Paula," I promised.

It didn't take long. I'd given Thomson the car's license number and description. Also our second car should still be on his tail. Thomson radioed the Yard and an all-cars message went out. Then, leaving his sergeant to receive the photography and pathology experts, we all went back to his office.

The Riley was heading east. Before it left the built-up area for the open roads of the Essex marshes they brought off an encircling move. The Riley made a desperate effort to crash through, burst a tire as it ripped its flank against the rear of a police car, rolled on two wheels, and slammed into a stone wall.

It was only justice that at long last Maury should die in a car crash.

"How did you get on to the identity business?" Thomson asked as we mulled over the contents of the dead man's pockets.

"Maury," I told him, "was offstage during Paula's trial, having plastic surgery following a car

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crash. He was away a long time and he came back changed, of course. One would expect that. It suggested something to me, though, and I checked with the nursing home. The photograph you gave me—of the hit-and-run victim—wasn't Maury's, but that of a patient there at the same time. He had been roughly of the same build and coloring and also needed plastic surgery. He and Maury struck up a friendship. It ended with a chummy little pact to switch identities.

"This other fellow, Alan Strang, became Maury and took over the garage. Maury, together with the money Paula had extracted from Dame Alice, disappeared. He reappeared yesterday to make a quick dispatch of the only two people who could identify him. He stole a car to run Alan Strang down—to officially end himself and to remove any lead to himself when Paula's murder should be investigated. He killed Strang the day before he thought Paula was due to come out, because the first person she'd make for would be Maury, and if she found an impostor she'd certainly sing about it. And besides, Paula would no longer have fitted into his life."

"And the jewels?" asked Thomson. "Do you think they will be there after all these years?"

"They were," I told him, "until our Borehampton representative extracted 'em this afternoon, completely intact. Paula had chosen an ideal hiding place—in the hollow seat of the Carnival Throne. It's used only one week each year and then carefully stored away for the rest of the year. They're not ever likely to scrap it because it cost so much—a gift from Dame Alice to the Carnival Committee of her Borehampton Holiday Camp.

"Paula put the gems there as soon as Maury handed them over. She says he was scared to hold on to them because he couldn't unload. They were her security while Maury secretly invested the cash she had filched from Dame Alice."

"M'm. Señor Roberto Torres," pronounced Thomson unspanishly, reading from the passport he had taken from Maury's pocket. "Resident of Panama City—import-export merchant. Our Maury seems to have done well for himself while Paula languished behind bars. Here's his wife's photograph too—Señora Rosina Torres. H'm, aged twenty-two. As you say, there would have been no room for Paula in his new life."

"Pity," I said. "It was a good crime, as crimes go. And the Paula-Maury partnership had promise. If only Maury, like Paula, had known how to wait."

Which reminded me, of course, that Hardy was eternally waiting, attached to his desk telephone. Time to ring him with the expense sheet he wanted. And he could hardly question it now that we'd recovered £50,000 in jewels!

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There are day people and there are night people, and as the founder and unofficial president of The Insomniacs Club pointed out: night people have certain definite advantages . . . a clever and "different" story . . .

THE INSOMNIACS CLUB

by JOHN LUTZ

WALTER THORN'S RUBBER-SOLED shoes trod silently on the shadowed pavement. He looked about him, his slender face under the thinning brown hair its usual combination of intensity and frustration. There should be noise, he thought, as he gazed at the rows of tall brick buildings that towered into the darkness on either side of him. He was walking at the bottom of an immense stone canyon, a place of hollow echoes, but it was 3 A.M. and there simply was no noise to create echoes. The only thing stirring was Walter, and it seemed to him that his passage down North Street was like his passage through life—silent, unnoticed, meaningless.

He reached beneath his jacket and drew a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his pajamas. Yes, he thought again—for he was prone to daydreams if not night dreams—if I were a motion picture director I'd have noise here, maybe a far-off police siren, an ashcan lid falling, hollow footsteps . . . He flicked his lighter and slid it back into his pants pocket. He wasn't a motion picture director, of course; he was an accountant—had been for ten years, at the same firm, and for almost the same salary.

He drew on the cigarette and resumed his walk in the night. There was a dreamlike, treadmill quality to walking through the Sterling Executive Apartment project, for all the buildings were alike, neat four-story brick moderns. And you could walk six blocks in any direction from Walter's building before seeing anything different. Walter had lived there for almost a year now, at his wife's insistence. Lately he did everything at Beulah's insistence.

Walter's step faltered for a moment when he first heard them—footsteps, hollow-sounding and echoing, as he would have directed them in a movie. He walked on as before, tossing his cigarette into a small puddle of water in the street and hearing it hiss minutely and angrily as it was extinguished. He wasn't too worried, for there was a marked absence of the hoodlum element here in the Executive Apartment area.

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The man turned the corner half a block up and walked toward him. Walter felt a twinge of uneasiness. As the man passed one of the evenly spaced streetlights, Walter saw that he was well dressed, but like Walter his clothes seemed to have been hastily put on.

They closed in on each other, the hollow footfalls growing louder. Walter kept his eyes averted until he was a mere ten feet from the approaching figure; then he looked up and took in the man's appearance carefully—medium height, dark hair, a bit older than Walter's 35 and better-looking, wearing a half-buttoned light raincoat against the threat of showers. Walter braced himself and got ready for anything.

"Evening," the man said, smiling pleasantly. "Can't sleep either, huh?"

That was all. He didn't even break stride and was past Walter before he could think of a reply.

Walter let out his breath in relief. Sure! In a big group of buildings like this there probably were plenty of people who couldn't sleep, maybe even a few insomniacs in each building. And probably a lot of them walked at night just like Walter. It was a common thing, and so it was not so uncommon that they should meet occasionally in the early morning hours. Habit, as well as good sense, would tend to make them confine their pacing to the perfectly squared, well-lighted streets of the apartment area rather than stray out into one of the surrounding poorer neighborhoods. Walter didn't have a monopoly on insomnia.

Walter's deduction turned out to be right, for he happened to meet the same man the next night on East Street. This time Walter nodded pleasantly as they passed. Then the night came when the man asked Walter for a light, and they struck up a conversation and introduced each other.

The man's name was Alan Kirkland, and it turned out he lived three blocks from Walter in Executive 20. All the apartment buildings were numbered, from 1 through 60, and they all rented for the same exorbitant amount, with the exception of Executive 1, which rented for more. Prestige.

It turned out that this necessity for prestige had caused Kirkland, like Walter, to begin living at the very limit of his means. But now there were unexpected bills to pay, and Kirkland couldn't sleep.

It seemed to Walter, as their acquaintance progressed, that Kirkland was leading up to something. And one cool night when they ceased their aimless walking to sit on a hard bus-stop bench, Walter got an inkling of what that something was.

"Have you ever wondered, Walter," Kirkland asked as he leisurely packed his briar pipe, "how many insomniacs like you and me there are in a big project like this?"

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"Often," Walter said.

"And as you know, Walter, lots of us, when we can't sleep, *really* can't sleep—we almost *have to* get outside and walk. You know there are a lot of people out walking the streets in the early morning, more than most people think. You go stir crazy otherwise."

"Indeed you do," Walter said, watching Kirkland fire up the briar, noticing little flecks of gray shimmering in the dark hair on his temples.

Kirkland flicked the match away. "The fact is, Walter, a number of us early-morning insomniacs have gotten together to form a sort of club."

"Club?" Walter asked. "What do you do?"

"Why, we meet, Walter. Like all clubs, we meet."

"That's interesting," Walter said. "The Insomniacs Club."

Kirkland sat quietly puffing on his pipe, volunteering nothing more. It was just like him to catch the conversational ball and tuck it in his pocket.

"How, uh, many are there in your club?" Walter asked.

"Counting me," Kirkland said, "nine. Six men and three women."

Women, Walter thought with a sudden flush. He had a wild notion of what Kirkland was driving at. Too wild a notion, he told himself, a little bit ashamed. He'd been faithful to Beulah for the eleven years of their marriage. Though from time to time he couldn't help asking himself why.

Kirkland swiveled his body on the bench to face Walter. "Have you considered," he asked in a confidential tone, "that there are certain advantages to friendships formed after midnight? Though we members of the club know one another, we know little *about* one another except for our common bond of insomnia. And more importantly, no one, none of the day people, connect us with one another—to them we are perfect strangers."

Walter swallowed. "You mentioned certain advantages?"

Kirkland smiled. "I named them, Walter, I named them. It's up to us to use them."

"But how?"

Kirkland placed a hand on Walter's shoulder, somehow making Walter feel uncomfortable. "Suppose you come along to our meeting tomorrow night?" Kirkland asked through teeth that clenched the pipestem. "It isn't anyone that we invite, you know. The membership is limited."

Walter considered asking why but thought better of it. He fought down his hesitancy and for once decided to act on impulse. "I'm honored," he said, and then in an attempt at a joke added, "After all, I haven't much else to do."

Kirkland's hand tightened on his shoulder. "You'd be surprised, Walter." He smiled broadly around the pipe and stood up. "I'll meet you

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here tomorrow night—say at three?"

"Fine," Walter said, getting to his feet.

They parted, both men trying to beat the dawn home.

The next night Kirkland took Walter to the meeting in an apartment of a bachelor member of the club, a very fat man named Leon Stubbs. By 3:15 A.M. they were all there, sitting as comfortably as possible on Stubbs's modern furniture and sipping his liquor. Walter had been given a particularly strong martini.

"I suppose we should get the meeting under way," Kirkland said, standing and walking to a part of the room where he was visible to everyone. He seemed to be the unofficial president of the club. Walter glanced nervously around at the club members, whom he'd been introduced to and half of whose names he'd already forgotten. For a fleeting moment he wondered if he could be home in bed dreaming.

"Now," Kirkland went on, his voice like a pinch to Walter's idle thought, "we have a new candidate for membership in the person of Walter Thorn. I've known Walter fairly long and I've talked to him considerably of many personal matters. I think he's the man to make our final member."

Walter noticed that the members were paying rapt attention. The men, some of them with pajama cuffs showing beneath trousers or shirts, sat as if at a business meeting. The women wore the look that Beulah had when she was talking long distance to her sister in Washington. Walter had been disappointed to find that two of the women were quite average-looking, but the other, a Miss Morganford, was a somewhat more promising blonde. Miss Morganford, wearing dark slacks and bedroom slippers, was sitting next to Walter on the sofa.

"If you recommend him, Alan," Stubbs said, "I don't think we'll find much fault with him."

"That's right," a fortyish woman with horn-rimmed glasses said. "After all, it was Mr. Kirkland who brought us together."

Kirkland produced his briar pipe from a pocket and stood for a moment thoughtfully rolling it between thumb and forefinger. "I propose that we acquaint Walter with the purpose of our club and let him decide whether or not he wishes to join. Take my word that he's an honorable man, and if he chooses not to join us I'm sure he'll remain silent. Anyway, things should be got into operation as soon as possible. For some of us the need is quite pressing and further delay would be foolish."

Walter heard some of the members exhale loudly and a tall redheaded man shifted uncomfortably and stared into his martini.

"Well?" Kirkland asked.

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The members murmured assent.

Kirkland smiled and addressed himself to Walter. "The fact is, Walter, like all of us here you have an increasing need for money; you're bogged down, bored with your work, unhappy, not getting any younger. And if it isn't a need for money that's robbing you of your sleep, it's something that can be alleviated by money. Life has become nothing more than a monotonous struggle."

Walter bowed his head uneasily.

Miss Morganford touched his knee. "It doesn't hurt to admit it," she said in an understanding voice.

"All right," Walter said softly, "I admit it."

"So much I've learned from our conversations, Walter," Kirkland said more to the members than to Walter. "And I want you to know that you're among friends here."

Walter forced a smile. "Then the purpose of the club is sort of—group therapy?"

Leon Stubbs chuckled, but Kirkland pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"In a way," Kirkland said, "only we intend to do something specific about our common problem."

"But what?"

"Eliminate it." Now Kirkland lit the briar and puffed miniature clouds of smoke into the room. "As I said before, Walter, there are certain advantages to after-midnight friendships." He waved the pipe to take in all the occupants of the room. "We know one another, trust one another, but to the daytime world there is nothing to connect any of us." His eyes narrowed behind the smoke. "Here is a fact that can be used to our advantage." He focused his narrow eyes on Walter. "Tell me, does your wife know when you leave the apartment at night?"

"I've mentioned it sometimes," Walter said, "but usually she doesn't. She sleeps like a log."

"It's a curious fact," Kirkland said, "that the mates and family members of most insomniacs do sleep like logs. It reduces the risk of our plan to an absolute minimum."

"But just what is the plan?" Walter asked, noticing that the back of Miss Morganford's hand still rested against his leg.

Kirkland looked at him with a sardonic but respectful smile. "It's illegal—you should know that before we go further."

Walter put his hands on his knees as if to stand. "You'd better not go any further," he said nervously. "I don't want to be responsible for hurting anyone."

"Oh, wait," Miss Morganford said pleadingly. "At least hear us out. I'm sure you'll change your mind. I wouldn't hurt anyone either."

"No one will be hurt," Kirkland said reassuringly. "Only some big insurance companies, and for amounts that, while substantial to us, they'll hardly miss."

Walter sat back. "Then the crime is stealing."

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Kirkland nodded.

"From who?"

"Why, from each other. That's why there's no risk; the victims will cooperate."

"I don't understand." Walter said as Stubbs poured him another ready-mix martini.

"Look," Kirkland said, brandishing the briar pipe, "suppose one of us here in this room burglarizes another's apartment at a set time when it's perfectly safe? Suppose every one of us here in this room burglarizes another's apartment? None of us are known to be acquainted. To the police it will simply look like ten unconnected crimes pulled off by the same thief, because we'll use the same *modus operandi* each time. They'll think a professional burglar is working this area."

"It makes sense," Walter said, sipping his drink. "And the insurance—"

"Exactly! Each of us has some heavily insured jewelry. When it's stolen we'll each collect the insurance money. I've arranged for the jewels to be sold to a reliable fence, and the proceeds will be evenly split among us." He grinned. "Pays better than an accountant's job, Walter, and it's just as safe—safer. Several insurance companies will be involved, so they'll pay off and will hardly bother to check. And you'll never have to worry about anyone here talking, because we'll all be equally guilty—and we'll all find it equally profitable."

Walter finished his drink slowly. "It *does* sound foolproof—"

"You think about it, Walter," Kirkland said, still smiling. "I'm sure we can rely on your silence in the meantime. Heck, I'll bet you wouldn't want Beulah even to know you were here."

"No," Walter said shakily, "I wouldn't. Yes, I will think about it. I'll think about it a lot."

The club members, in a noticeably more relaxed mood, lapsed into amiable chatter as another round of drinks was served by Stubbs, and before the sun came up, the meeting was adjourned.

Walter thought the matter over for a week. Each night while walking the streets he would just happen to run into Kirkland and his persuasiveness, and Miss Morganford even broke the rules of the club to telephone him and personally urge him to join. It was no wonder that at the next meeting of The Insomniacs Club, Walter became a member and was told the details of the plan.

He was shown how the lock on Stubbs's front door could easily be slipped with a piece of celluloid, and all Executive Apartment locks were of the same type. A piece of celluloid would be dropped at the scene of the first burglary to establish the method of entry, but from then on the doors would simply be left unlocked. On each robbery the same pair of ribbed gloves with a distinc-

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tive identifying mark on the forefinger would be used. The future burglars were all reminded to leave glove prints.

An irregular schedule covering five weeks was worked out, with the apartments of successive victims arranged in an unsymmetrical and unpredictable pattern. Walter's apartment was to be robbed last because he'd just increased his insurance and a five-week interval would be least suspicious. Each victim told the time of night or early morning most convenient for the crime to be safely committed and made sure his or her future burglar knew exactly where every member of the family slept and exactly where the jewels were kept. The victim was to mess things up a bit before retiring for the night, so the burglar could get in and out quietly and in a hurry.

As for the choice of burglar and victim, each member would be a burglar the crime before he himself would be victimized. Thus before any attention at all was cast on him he would have the previous crime's loot safely hidden away outside the apartment project. He would then leave the ribbed gloves in an agreed-on spot in *his* apartment for his burglar to slip on as soon as he wiped off the doorknob and entered. This way there was no chance of anyone being caught on the street before a burglary with the incriminating gloves, for they would be waiting conveniently at the scene of each crime.

And with the loot hidden in nine different spots—nine because it would be safer not to have the necessary first victim commit a later robbery—there would be no chance of anyone absconding with the jewels; so when they did sleep, the club members would rest easier. It would all be finished before the police had even a chance to get a whiff of anything suspicious. On a date a few weeks after the last burglary, The Insomniacs Club would meet again, the loot would be given to Kirkland and, on his insistence, two elected club members would go with him that morning to sell it and hold the money. At a meeting the next night the small fortune would be divided in equal shares.

Everyone made sure of his instructions, and until the future wave of jewel thefts that was to sweep over the Executive Apartments had ended, club meetings were postponed.

Things seemed to progress with incredible smoothness. Three days after the last club meeting Walter read on page 8 of the newspaper how $10,000 worth of jewelry had been stolen from Miss Mary Gordon, a resident of the Sterling Executive Apartments. Walter smiled to himself as he sat across the table from Beulah and read this item. He knew that a tall redheaded man named Fenwick had committed that robbery, and he knew that in two nights Miss Morganford would

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walk into Fenwick's apartment, slip on the same gloves, and relieve the Fenwicks of their jewelry. Then, four nights later, it would be Miss Morganford's turn to be robbed. And eventually—here Walter did smile behind the paper—it would be his, Walter Thorn's, turn.

The plan seemed to be working so flawlessly that Walter actually looked forward to his turn with delicious anticipation. On September 11th at 2:15 A.M. he was to walk into Alan Kirkland's apartment, slip on the gloves he'd find under the entrance-hall throw rug, and walk to the door of the master bedroom—Walter knew where this was because his apartment was laid out the same way. Kirkland, who would already have displaced things in the apartment while his wife was sleeping, would be lying next to his soundly sleeping mate and actually watching as Walter walked to the top-left drawer of the triple dresser and quietly emptied Mrs. Kirkland's jewelry box. Then, a scant two minutes after he'd entered, Walter would make his exit, touching things here and there to leave the distinctive glove prints.

As Walter waited his turn, he watched the newspaper stories on the robberies move through editorials and lingerie advertisements toward the front page. And as more robberies occurred, police protection in the apartment project increased. This meant little or nothing, for the police were pathetically undermanned and the Executive Apartment area was large. Only once during a late night walk did Walter see a police car cruise by, and then it was two blocks away. Getting in and out of the apartment buildings unseen posed no problem. In fact, so helpless were the police that they had the newspapers explain the method of entry in the rash of jewel thefts and urged all citizens of the area to install special locks on their doors. And some citizens did—but not the citizens who counted.

As Walter knew it eventually would, the early morning of September 11th came to pass, and he found himself walking silently down East Street on his rubber soles toward Kirkland's apartment in Executive 20. The warm night was quiet and the street was empty, but still Walter felt an indefinable qualm, an unexpected queasiness at what he was about to do.

He shook this feeling off as he stepped down from the curb and crossed a deserted side street. He made himself think of how things would be after the burglary, picturing himself on Stubbs's sofa sitting next to Miss Morganford, each of them drinking a martini and gleefully counting their part of the proceeds.

Then he was in the deep shadow of Kirkland's apartment building. Glancing up and down the dark street to make sure he was unobserved, he breathed deeply and casually entered, as if he lived there.

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He walked swiftly up the marble stairs and down the soundproofed hall, and before he knew it he was standing trembling in the Kirkland's entrance hall, just inside the front door.

Walter reopened the front door a crack and wiped the knob clean of his own prints with a handkerchief, closed the door again, then got out his small penlight, and found and put on the gloves. He moved across the deep carpet into the Kirkland's living room.

Walter flashed the penlight beam about as he moved silently toward the master bedroom. Kirkland had done his job, opening drawers, tilting picture frames, overturning lamps. And he'd done it all with the telltale gloves, so even if by some wild quirk Walter was seen entering and leaving the building it would mean nothing, for the thief would have had to spend at least twenty minutes to search so thoroughly before finding the jewels. Walter would be gone in less than two minutes.

He entered the bedroom cautiously, seeing the two figures on the double bed. The drapes were partly open and there was enough light in the room to get the jewels without the aid of the penlight. Walter held his breath, moved to the correct open dresser drawer, and reached inside. His hand closed on the jewels in the open box and he began to stuff his pockets.

"What is it, dear?"

The woman's voice cut through Walter's body like a blade of ice.

"What the hell?" Kirkland's voice said.

There was a rustling movement on the bed behind Walter, then an ear-shattering scream, long and loud. A string of pearls broke in his clenched hand and the pearls went bouncing about the room. "Oh, good Lord," Walter moaned aloud, and he was out of the bedroom and running.

He hit the apartment door and fumbled it open, then he was dashing down the hall toward the stairs. There was light, and voices around him. A door opened down the hall and a small bald man stuck his head out, shutting the door part way and peering out curiously at Walter as he flew past, like a man watching a mad dog, ready to slam the door if it veered in his direction. Walter stumbled down the marble stairs, crashed into the front door, and was out in the street.

Windows were now lit up and sirens were wailing as he ran down East Street.

"Stop him!" Kirkland shouted—and that's when Walter knew.

It became clearer to him with every jarring step, with every stab of pain in his ribs. He'd been chosen to make the pattern complete. The robberies wouldn't be investigated further by the police because the thief would already have been apprehended. Naturally the thief would concoct some fantastic story

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rather than say where he'd sold the jewels and hidden or spent the money; so the insurance companies would take their losses and decide the jewelry had vanished in the mysterious channels of the underworld. And to prove Walter's guilt beyond question, after his arrest the robberies would stop.

A siren screamed unbelievably loud and a police car suddenly screeched to a rocking halt directly in front of Walter. He tried to spin on his heel but he tripped and fell sobbing on the suddenly bright pavement. He heard two more cars squeal to a stop and headlight beams blinded him.

Iron-strong hands yanked Walter to his feet and he was leaned against the rough brick wall of Executive 16 and expertly searched. They collected the evidence—the stolen jewelry and the ribbed gloves. He could hear them asking him at the station, "Where were you on this night and that night?" "I go out walking," he'd answer; "I have insomnia." He could hear them laughing.

His arm twisted behind him, he was led back up the street toward a waiting patrol wagon. He could feel hundreds of eyes on him as he lowered his head in defeat and shame. "Alan—" he pleaded to Kirkland as he was led past the crowd of onlookers, but it was natural that the thief would case his future jobs and know his victims' names. The shame cut deeper as he was pushed up into the back of the patrol wagon.

But to Walter the worst part of all was when the door of the patrol wagon was slammed shut. Then for the first time he was plagued by the vision of endless future nights—nights when he would wake up perspiring in a ten-by-ten cell, and there would be no place to go.

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a NERO WOLFE *short novel* by
REX STOUT

complete in this issue

So far as we know, no one has ever said about New York City that anything can happen there and usually does. But would you believe a rope-dropping contest from a penthouse on 63rd Street onto a cowboy and horse one hundred feet below? Out West, yes (from a mesa instead of a penthouse). But right off Park Avenue? It not only happened but it was the curtain-raiser to an even more dramatic, even more incongruous event to occur in New York—murder by lariat . . .

One of Nero Wolfe's—and Archie Goodwin's—liveliest short novels, complete in this issue . . .

THE RODEO MURDER

by REX STOUT

CAL BARROW WAS STANDING AT THE tail end of the horse with his arm extended and his fingers wrapped around the strands of the rope that was looped over the horn of the cowboy saddle. His gray-blue eyes—as much of them as the half-closed lids left in view—were straight at me. His voice was low and easy, and noise from the group out front was coming through the open door, but I have good ears.

"Nothing to start a stampede," he said. "I just wanted to ask you how I go about taking some hide off a toad in this town." To give it as it actually sounded I would have to make it, "Ah jist wanted to ask yuh how Ah go about takin' some hide off a toad," but that's too complicated, and from here on I'll leave the sound effects to you if you want to bother.

I was sliding my fingertips up and down on the polished stirrup strap so that observers, if any, would assume that we were discussing the saddle. "I suppose," I said, "it's a two-legged toad." Then, as a brown-haired cowgirl named Nan Karlin, in a pink silk shirt opened at the throat and regulation Levis, came through the arch and headed for the door to the terrace, lifting

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the heels of her fancy boots to navigate the Kashan rug that had set Lily Rowan back fourteen thousand bucks, I raised my voice a little so she wouldn't have to strain her ears if she was curious. "Sure," I said, rubbing the leather, "you could work it limber, but why don't they make it limber?"

But I may be confusing you, since a Kashan carpet with a garden pattern in seven colors is no place for a horse to stand, so I had better explain. The horse was a sawhorse. The saddle was to go to the winner in a roping contest that was to start in an hour. The Kashan, 19x34, was on the floor of the living room of Lily Rowan's penthouse, which was on the roof of a ten-story building on 63rd Street between Madison and Park Avenues, Manhattan. The time was three o'clock Monday afternoon. The group out on the terrace had just gone there for coffee after leaving the dining room, where the high point of the meal had been two dozen young blue grouse which had come from Montana on man-made wings, their own having stopped working. As we had moseyed through the living room on our way to the terrace Cal Barrow had got me aside to say he wanted to ask me something private, and we had detoured to inspect the saddle.

When Nan Karlin had passed and was outside, Cal Barrow didn't have to lower his voice again because he hadn't raised it. "Yeah, two legs," he said. (Make it "laigs.") "I got to ask somebody that knows this town and I was thinking this bozo Goodwin is the one to ask, he's in the detective business here and he ought to know. And my friend Harvey Greve tells me you're okay. I'm calling you Archie, am I?"

"So it was agreed at the table. First names all around."

"Suits me." He let go of the rope and gripped the edge of the cantle. "So I'll ask you. I'm a little worked up. Out where I live I wouldn't have to ask nobody, but here I'm no better'n a dogie. I been to Calgary and Pendleton, but I never come East before for this blowout. Huh. World Series Rodeo. From what I see so far you can have it."

He made it "roe-day-oh" with the accent on the "day." I nodded. "Madison Square Garden has no sky. But about this toad. We're supposed to go out with them for coffee. How much of his hide do you need?"

"I'll take a fair-sized patch." There was a glint in his eye. "Enough so he'll have to lick it till it gets a scab. The trouble is this blamed blowout, I don't want to stink it up my first time here, if it wasn't for that I'd just handle it. I'd get him to provoke me."

"Hasn't he already provoked you?"

"Yeah, but I'm leaving that out. I was thinking you might even like to show him and me something. Have you got a car?"

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I said I had.

"Then when we get through here you might like to take him and me to show us some nice little spot like on the river bank. There must be a spot somewhere. It would be better if you was there anyhow because if I kinda lost control and got too rough you could stop me. When I'm worked up I might get my teeth on the bit."

"Or I could stop him if necessary."

The glint showed again. "I guess you don't mean that. I wouldn't like to think you mean that."

I grinned at him, Archie to Cal. "What the hell, how do I know? You haven't named him. What if it's Mel Fox? He's bigger than you are, and Saturday night at the Garden I saw him bulldog a steer in twenty-three seconds. It took you thirty-one."

"My steer was meaner. Mel said so himself. Anyway it's not him. It's Wade Eisler."

My brows went up. Wade Eisler couldn't bulldog a milk cow in twenty-three hours, but he had rounded up ten million bucks, more or less, and he was the chief backer of the World Series Rodeo. If it got out that one of the cowboy contestants had taken a piece of his hide it would indeed stink it up, and it was no wonder that Cal Barrow wanted a nice little spot on a river bank. I not only raised my brows; I puckered my lips.

"Ouch." I said. "You'd better let it lay, at least for a week, until the rodeo's over and the prizes awarded."

"No, sir. I sure would like to, but I got to get it done. Today. I don't rightly know how I held off when I got here and saw him here. It would be a real big favor, Mr. Goodwin. Here in your town. Will you do it?"

I was beginning to like him. Especially I liked his not shoving by overworking the "Archie." He was a little younger than me, but not much, so it wasn't respect for age; he just wasn't a fudger.

"How did he provoke you?" I asked.

"That's private. Didn't I say I'm leaving that out?"

"Yes, but I can leave it out too. I don't say I'll play if you tell me, but I certainly won't if you don't. Whether I play or not, you can count on me to leave it out—or keep it in. As a private detective I get lots of practice keeping things in."

The gray-blue eyes were glued on me. "You won't tell anyone?"

"Right."

"Whether you help me or not?"

"Right."

"He got a lady to go to his place last night by telling her he was having a party, and when they got there there wasn't any party, and he tried to handle her. Did you see the scratch on his cheek?"

"Yes, I noticed it."

"She's not very big, but she's active. All she got was a little skin

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off her ear when her head hit a corner of a table."

"I noticed that too."

"So I figure he's due to lose a bigger—" He stopped short. He slapped the saddle. "Now, damn it, that's me every time. Now you know who she is. I was going to leave that out."

"I'll keep it in. She told you about it?"

"Yes, sir she did. This morning."

"Did she tell anyone else?"

"No, sir, she wouldn't. I got no brand on her, nobody has, but maybe some day when she quiets down a little and I've got my own corral . . . You've seen her on a bronc."

I nodded. "I sure have. I was looking forward to seeing her off of one, closer up, but now of course I'll keep my distance. I don't want to lose any hide."

His hand left the saddle. "I guess you just say things. I got no claim. I'm a friend of hers and she knows it, that's all. A couple of years ago I was wrangling dudes down in Arizona and she was snapping sheets at the hotel, and we kinda made out together and I guess I come in handy now and then. I don't mind coming in handy as long as I can look ahead. Right now I'm a friend of hers and that suits me fine. She might be surprised to know how I—"

His eyes left me and I turned. Nero Wolfe was there, entering from the terrace. Somehow he always looks bigger away from home, I suppose because my eyes are so used to fitting his dimensions into the interiors of the old brownstone on West 35th. There he was, a mountain coming at us. As he approached he spoke. "If I may interrupt?" He allowed two seconds for objections, got none, and went on. "My apologies, Mr. Barrow." To me: "I have thanked Miss Rowan for a memorable meal and explained to her. To watch the performance I would have to stretch across that parapet and I am not built for it. If you drive me home now you can be back before four o'clock."

I glanced at my wrist. Ten after three. "More people are coming, and Lily has told them you'll be here. They'll be disappointed."

"Pfui. I have nothing to contribute to this frolic."

I wasn't surprised; in fact, I had been expecting it. He had got what he came for, so why stick around? What had brought him was the grouse. When, two years back, I had returned from a month's visit to Lily Rowan on a ranch she had bought in Montana, (where, incidentally, I had met Harvey Greve, Cal Barrow's friend), the only detail of my trip that had really interested Wolfe was one of the meals I described. At that time of year, late August, the young blue grouse are around ten weeks old and their main item of diet has been mountain huckleberries, and I had told Wolfe they were tastier than any

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bird Fritz had ever cooked, even quail or woodcock. Of course, since they're protected by law, they can cost up to five dollars a bite if you get caught.

Lily Rowan doesn't treat laws as her father did while he was piling up the seventeen million bucks he left her, but she can take them or leave them. So when she learned that Harvey Greve was coming to New York for the rodeo, and she decided to throw a party for some of the cast, and she thought it would be nice to feed them young blue grouse, the law was merely a hurdle to hop over. Since I'm a friend of hers and she knows it, that will do for that. I will add only a brief report of a scene in the office on the ground floor of the old brownstone. It was Wednesday noon. Wolfe, at his desk, was reading the *Times*. I, at my desk, finished a phone call, hung up, and swiveled.

"That's interesting," I said. "That was Lily Rowan. As I told you, I'm going to a roping contest at her place Monday afternoon. A cowboy is going to ride a horse along Sixty-third Street, and other cowboys are going to try to rope him from the terrace of her penthouse, a hundred feet up. Never done before. First prize will be a saddle with silver trimmings."

He grunted. "Interesting?"

"Not that. That's just games. But a few of them are coming earlier for lunch, at one o'clock, and I'm invited, and she just had a phone call from Montana. Twenty young blue grouse, maybe more, will arrive by plane Saturday afternoon, and Felix is going to come and cook them. I'm glad I'm going. It's too bad you and Lily don't get along—ever since she squirted perfume on you."

He put the paper down to glare. "She didn't squirt perfume on me."

I flipped a hand. "It was her perfume."

He picked up the paper, pretended to read a paragraph, and dropped it again. He passed his tongue over his lips. "I have no animus for Miss Rowan. But I will not solicit an invitation."

"Of course not. You wouldn't stoop. I don't—"

"But you may ask if I would accept one."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"Good. She asked me to invite you, but I was afraid you'd decline and I'd hate to hurt her feelings. I'll tell her." I reached for the phone.

I report that incident so you'll understand why he got up and left after coffee. I not only wasn't surprised when he came and interrupted Cal Barrow and me, I was pleased, because Lily had bet me a sawbuck he wouldn't stay for coffee. Leaving him there with Cal, I went to the terrace.

In the early fall Lily's front terrace is usually sporting annual flowers along the parapet and by the wall of

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the penthouse, and a few evergreens in tubs scattered around, but for that day the parapet was bare, and instead of the evergreens, which would have interfered with rope whirling, there were clumps of sagebrush two feet high in pots. The sagebrush had come by rail, not by air, but even so the part of Lily that had ordered it and paid for it is not my part. That will be no news to her when she reads this.

I glanced around. Lily was in a group seated to the right, with Wade Eisler on one side and Mel Fox on the other. In dash she wasn't up to the two cowgirls there, Nan Karlin in her pink silk shirt and Anna Casado, dark-skinned with black hair and black eyes, in her yellow one, but she was the hostess and not in competition. In situations that called for dash she had plenty. The other four were standing by the parapet at the left—Roger Dunning, the rodeo promoter, not in costume; his wife Ellen, former cowgirl, also not in costume; Harvey Greve in his brown shirt and red neck-rag and corduroy pants and boots; and Laura Jay. Having Laura Jay in profile, I could see the bandage on her ear through the strands of her hair, which was exactly the color of the thyme honey that Wolfe gets from Greece. At the dinner table she had told me that a horse had jerked his head around and the bit had bruised her, but now I knew different.

Stepping across to tell Lily I was leaving but would be back in time for the show, I took a side glance at Wade Eisler's plump, round face. The scratch, which began an inch below his left eye and slanted down nearly to the corner of his mouth, hadn't gone very deep and it had had some fifteen hours to calm down by Cal Barrow's account, but it didn't improve his looks any, and there was ample room for improvement. He was one of those New York characters that get talked about and he had quite a reputation as a smooth operator, but he certainly hadn't been smooth last night —according to Laura Jay as relayed by Cal Barrow. The caveman approach to courtship may have its points if that's the best you can do, but if I ever tried it I would have more sense than to pick a girl who could rope and tie a frisky calf in less than a minute.

After telling Lily I would be back in time for the show and was looking forward to collecting the sawbuck, I returned to the living room. Wolfe and Cal were admiring the saddle. I told Cal I would think it over and let him know, went to the foyer and got Wolfe's hat and stick, followed him down the flight of stairs to the tenth floor, and rang for the elevator. We walked the two blocks to the parking lot where I had left the Heron sedan, which Wolfe had paid for but I had selected. Of course a taxi would have been simpler, but he hates things on

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wheels. To ride in a strange vehicle with a stranger driving would be foolhardy; with me at the wheel in a car of my choice it is merely imprudent.

Stopped by a red light on Park Avenue in the Fifties, I turned my head to say, "I'm taking the car back because I may need it. I may do a little errand for one of the cowboys. If so I probably won't be home for dinner."

"A professional errand?"

"No. Personal."

He grunted. "You have the afternoon, as agreed. If the errand is personal it is not my concern. But, knowing you as I do, I trust it is innocuous."

"So do I." The light changed and I fed gas.

It was ten minutes to four when I got back to the parking lot on 63rd Street. Walking west, I crossed Park Avenue and stopped for a look. Five cops were visible. One was talking to the driver of a car who wanted to turn the corner, two were standing at the curb talking, and two were holding off an assortment of pedestrians who wanted to get closer to three mounted cowboys. The cowboys were being spoken to by a man on foot, not in costume. As I moved to proceed one of the cops at the curb blocked me and spoke. "Do you live in this block, sir?"

I told him no, I was going to Miss Lily Rowan's party, and he let me pass. The New York Police Department likes to grant reasonable requests from citizens, especially when the request comes from a woman whose father was a Tammany district leader for thirty years. There were no parked cars on that side of the street, but twenty paces short of the building entrance a truck with cameras was hugging the curb, and there was another one farther on, near Madison Avenue.

When I had left with Wolfe, Lily had had nine guests; now she had twenty or more. Three of the new arrivals were cowboys, making six with Cal Barrow, Harvey Greve, and Mel Fox; the rest were civilians. They were all on the terrace. The civilians were at the parapet, half at one end and half at the other, leaving the parapet clear for thirty feet in the middle. The cowboys, their ten-gallon hats on their heads and their ropes in their hands, were lined up facing a tall skinny man in a brown suit. At the man's elbow was Roger Dunning, the promoter. The man was speaking.

". . . and that's the way it's going to be. I'm the judge and what I say goes. I repeat that Greve hasn't done any practicing, and neither has Barrow or Fox. I have Miss Rowan's word for that, and I don't think you want to call her a liar. I've told you the order, but you don't move in until I call your name. Remember what I said, if you take a tumble off a bronc it's four feet down; here it's a hundred feet

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down and you won't get up and walk. Once again, *no hooligan stuff*. There's not supposed to be any pedestrians on this side of the street from four o'clock to five, but if one comes out of a house and one of you drops a loop on him you won't sleep in a hotel room tonight. We're here to have some fun, but don't get funny." He looked at his watch. "Time to go. Fox, get—"

"I want to say something," Roger Dunning said.

"Sorry, Roger, no time. We promised to start on the dot. Fox, get set. The rest of you scatter."

He went to the parapet, to the left, and picked up a green flag on a stick that was there on a chair. Mel Fox stepped to the middle of the clear stretch, straddled the parapet, and started his noose going. The others went right and left to find spots in the lines of guests. I found a spot on the right that happened to be between Laura Jay and Anna Casado. Leaning over to get a view of the street, I saw I was blocking Laura Jay and drew in a little.

The three mounted cowboys and the man I had seen talking to them were grouped on the pavement halfway to Park Avenue. The judge stuck his arm out with the green flag and dipped it, the man down with the mounted cowboys said something, and one of the ponies was off on the jump, heading down the middle of the lane between the curb on our side and the parked cars on the other. Mel Fox, leaning out from his hips, moved his whirling loop back a little, and then brought it forward and let it go. When it reached bottom it was a little too far out and the cowboy on the pony was twenty feet ahead of it. The instant it touched the pavement Fox started hauling it in; he had thirty seconds until the flag started number two. He had it up and a noose going in less than that, but the judge went by his watch.

The flag dipped, and here came the second one. That was a little better; the rope touched the pony's rump, but it was too far in. Fox hauled in again, shifted his straddle a little, and started another whirl. That time he nearly made it. Anna Casado, on my left, let out a squeal as the rope, descending smoothly in a perfect circle, brushed the edge of the cowboy's hat. The audience clapped, and a man in a window across the street shouted "Bravo!" Fox retrieved his rope, taking his time, dismounted from the parapet, said something I didn't catch because of other voices, and moved off as the judge called out, "Vince!"

A chunky little youngster in a purple shirt, Levis, and working boots mounted the parapet. Saturday night I had seen him stick it out bareback on one of the roughest broncs I had ever seen—not speaking as an expert. He wasn't so hot on a parapet. On his first try his loop turned straight up, which

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could have been an air current, on his second it draped over a parked car across the street, and on his third it hit the asphalt ten feet ahead of the pony.

Harvey Greve was next. Naturally I was rooting for him, since he had done me a lot of favors during the month I had spent at Lily's ranch. Lily called something to him from the other end of the parapet, and he gave her a nod as he threw his leg over and started his loop. His first throw was terrible; the noose buckled and flipped before it was halfway down. His second was absolutely perfect; it centered around the cowboy like a smoke ring around a fingertip, and Harvey timed the jerk just right and had him. A yell came from the audience as the cowboy tightened the reins and the pony braked, skidding on the asphalt. He loosened the loop with one hand and passed it over his head, and as soon as it was free the judge sang out "Thirty seconds!" and Harvey started hauling in. His third throw sailed down round and flat, but it was too late by ten feet.

As the judge called Barrow's name and Cal stepped to the parapet, Laura Jay, on my right, muttered, "He shouldn't try it." She was probably muttering to herself, but my ear was right there and I turned my head and asked her why. "Somebody stole his rope," she said.

"Stole it? When? How?"

"He don't know. It was in the closet with his hat and it was gone. We looked all around. He's using the one that was on that saddle and it's new and stiff, and he shouldn't—"

She stopped and I jerked my head around. The flag had dipped and the target was coming. Considering that he was using a strange rope, and a new one, Cal didn't do so bad. His loops kept their shape clear down, but the first one was short, the second was wide, and the third hit bottom before the pony got there.

Neither of the last two ropers, one named Lopez and the other Holcomb, did as well. When Holcomb's third noose curled on the curb below us the judge called, "Second round starts in two minutes! Everybody stay put!"

There were to be three rounds, giving each contestant a total of nine tries. Roger Dunning was stationed near the judge, with a pad of paper and a pen in his hand, to keep score in case the decision had to be made on form and how close they came; but since Harvey Greve had got one that wouldn't be necessary.

In the second round Fox got a rider and Lopez got a pony. In the third round Holcomb got a rider and Harvey got his second one. The winner and first world champion rope-dropper or drop-roper from one hundred feet up: Harvey Greve! He took the congratulations

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and the riding from the other competitors with the grin I knew so well, and when he got kissed by a friend of Lily's who was starring in a hit on Broadway and knew how to kiss both on stage and off, his face was nearly as pink as Nan Karlin's shirt. Anna Casado broke off a branch of sagebrush and stuck it under his hatband. Lily herded us into the living room, where we gathered around the sawhorse, and Roger Dunning was starting a presentation speech when Cal Barrow stopped him.

"Wait a minute, this goes with it," Cal said, and went and hung the rope on the horn. He turned and sent the blue-gray eyes right and then left. "I don't want to start no fuss right now, but when I find out who took mine I'll want to know." He moved to the rear of the crowd, and Dunning put his hand on the seat of the saddle. Dunning had a long and narrow bony face with a scar at the side of his jaw.

"This is a happy occasion," he said. "Thank God nothing happened like one of you falling off. I wanted to have a net down—"

"Louder!" Mel Fox called.

"You're just sore because you didn't win," Dunning told him. "I wanted to have a net below but they wouldn't. This magnificent saddle with genuine silver rivets and studs was handmade by Morrison, and I don't have to tell you what that means. It was donated by Miss Lily Rowan, and I want to thank her for her generosity and hospitality on behalf of everybody concerned. I now declare Harvey Greve the undisputed winner of the first and only roping contest ever held in a Park Avenue penthouse—anyway just outside the penthouse and we could see Park Avenue—and I award him the prize, this magnificent saddle donated by Miss Lily Rowan. Here it is, Harvey. It's all yours."

Applause and cheers. Someone called "Speech!" and others took it up, as Harvey went and flattened his palm on the sudadero. He faced the audience. "I tell you," he said, "if I tried to make a speech you'd take this saddle away from me. The only time I make a speech is when a cayuse gets from under me and that's no kind for here. You all know that was just luck out there, but I'm mighty glad I won because I sure had my eye on this saddle. The lady that kissed me, I didn't mind that at all, but I been working for Miss Lily Rowan for more'n three years and she never kissed me yet and this is her last chance."

They let out a whoop, and Lily ran to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and planted one on each cheek, and he went pink again. Two men in white jackets came through the arch, with trays loaded with glasses of champagne. In the alcove a man at the piano and two with fiddles started *Home on the Range*. Lily had asked me a week

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ago what I thought of having the rug up and trying some barn dancing, and I had told her I doubted if many of the cowboys and girls would know how, and none of the others would. Better just let the East meet the West.

The best way to drink champagne, for me anyhow, is to gulp the first glass as a primer and sip from there on. Lily was busy being a hostess, so I waited to go and touch glasses with her until I had taken a couple of sips from my second. "Doggone it," I told her, "I'd a brung my rope and give it a whirl if I'd known you was goin' tuh kiss the winner." She said, "Huh. If I ever kissed you in front of an audience the women would scream and the men would faint."

I moved around a while, being sociable, and wound up on a chair by a clump of sagebrush on the terrace, between Laura Jay and a civilian. Since I knew him well and didn't like him much, I didn't apologize for horning in. I asked her if Cal had found his rope, and she said she didn't think so, she hadn't seen him for the last half hour.

"Neither have I," I said. "He doesn't seem to be around. I wanted to ask him if he'd found it. I haven't seen Wade Eisler either. Have you?"

Her eyes met mine straight. "No. Why?"

"No special reason. I suppose you know I'm in the detective business."

"I know. You're with Nero Wolfe."

"I work for him. I'm not here on business, I'm a friend of Miss Rowan's, but I'm in the habit of noticing things, and I didn't see Wade Eisler at the parapet while they were roping, and I haven't seen him since. I know you better than I do the others, except Harvey Greve, because I sat next to you at lunch, so I just thought I'd ask."

"Don't ask me. Ask Miss Rowan."

"Oh, it's not that important. But I'm curious about Cal's rope. I don't see why—"

Cal Barrow was there. He had come from the rear and was suddenly there in front of me. He spoke, in his low easy voice. "Can I see you a minute, Archie?"

"Where have *you* been?" Laura demanded.

"I been around."

I stood up. "Find your rope?"

"I want to show you. You stay hitched, Laura." She had started up. "You hear me?" It was a command, and from her stare I guessed it was the first one he had ever given her. "Come along, Archie," he said, and moved.

He led me around the corner of the penthouse. On that side the terrace is only six feet wide, but in the rear there is space enough for a badminton court and then some. The tubs of evergreens that had been removed from the front were there, and Cal went on past them to the door of a shack which Lily

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used for storage. The grouse had been hung there Saturday afternoon. He opened the door and entered, and when I was in shut the door. The only light came from two small windows at the far end, so it was half dark coming in from broad daylight, and Cal said, "Look out, don't step on him."

I turned and reached for the light switch and flipped it, turned back, and stood and looked down at Wade Eisler. As I moved and squatted Cal said, "No use taking his pulse. He's dead."

He was. Thoroughly. The protruding tongue was purple and so were the lips and most of the face. The staring eyes were wide-open. The rope had been wound around his throat so many times, a dozen or more, that his chin was pushed up. The rest of the rope was piled on his chest.

"That's my rope," Cal said. "I was looking for it and I found it. I was going to take it but I thought I better not."

"You thought right." I was on my feet. I faced him and got his eyes. "Did you do it?"

"No, sir."

I looked at my wrist: twelve minutes to six. "I'd like to believe you," I said, "and until further notice I do. The last I saw you in there you were taking a glass of champagne. More than half an hour ago. I haven't seen you since. That's a long time."

"I been hunting my rope. When I drank that one glass I asked Miss Rowan if she minded if I looked and she said no. We had already looked inside and out front. Then when I come in here and found him I sat on that box a while to think it over. I decided the best thing was to get you."

"Wasn't this door locked?"

"No, sir. It was shut but it wasn't locked."

That was possible. It was often left unlocked in the daytime. I looked around. The room held all kinds of stuff—stacks of luggage, chairs, card tables, old magazines on shelves—but at the front, where we were, there was a clear space. Everything seemed to be in place; there was no sign that Eisler had put up a fight, and you wouldn't suppose a man would stand with his hands in his pockets while someone got a noose around his neck and pulled it tight. If he had been conked first, what with?

I stepped to a rack against the wall on the left and put a hand out, but pulled it back. One of those three-foot stainless-steel rods, for staking plants, would have been just the thing, and the one on top was lying across the others. If I had had gloves and a glass with me, and there had been no rush, and Cal hadn't been there with his eyes boring at me, I would have given it a look.

I opened the door, using my handkerchief for the knob, and stepped out. There were six win-

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dows in the rear of the penthouse, but except for the two near the far corner, which belonged to the maid's room and bathroom, their view of the shack and the approach to it was blocked by the evergreens. That had been a break for the murderer; there had certainly been someone in the kitchen.

I went back inside, shut the door, and told Cal, "Here's how it is. I have to get the cops here before anyone leaves if I want to keep my license. I don't owe Wade Eisler anything, but this will be a sweet mess for Miss Rowan and I'm a friend of hers, so I'm curious. When did you first miss the rope?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. He shook his head. "I guess I made a mistake," he said. "I should have took that rope off and found it somewhere else."

"You should like hell. It would have been a cinch for the police lab to prove it had been around his neck. When did you first miss it?"

"But I had told you about last night and how I was worked up and you had promised to keep it in, and I figured I couldn't expect you to be square with me if I wasn't square with you, so I went and got you. Now the way you take it, I don't know."

"For God's sake." I wasn't as disgusted as I sounded. "What did you think, I'd bring you a bottle of champagne? Wait till you see how the cops take it. When did you first miss the rope?"

"I don't know just what time. It was a while after you left, maybe twenty minutes. With people coming and putting things in that closet I thought I'd get it and hang onto it."

"Had you put it in the closet yourself?"

"Yeah. On the shelf with my hat on top. The hat was there but the rope was gone."

"Did you tell someone right away?"

"I looked all over the closet and then I told Laura and she told Miss Rowan. Miss Rowan asked everybody and she helped Laura and me look some, but people started coming."

"At the time you missed the rope had anybody already come? Was anyone here besides those who ate lunch with us?"

"No, sir."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure enough to put a no on it. They ain't much a man can be dead sure of. It might be someone came I didn't see, but I was right there and I'd have to—"

"Save it." I glanced at my watch: five minutes to six. "At the time you missed the rope where was Wade Eisler?"

"I don't know."

"When did you see him last?"

"I can't say exactly. I wasn't riding herd on him."

"Did you see him after you missed the rope? Take a second. This is important. Take ten."

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He screwed up his lips and shut his eyes. He took the full ten seconds. Hs eyes opened. "No, sir, I didn't."

"Sure enough to put a no on it?"

"I already did."

"Okay. Do you know if anyone else was worked up about Wade Eisler?"

"I wouldn't say worked up. I guess nobody wanted him for a pet."

"As it looks now, someone who ate lunch with us killed him. Have you any idea who?"

"No, sir. I don't expect to have none."

"That's noble. Don't be *too* noble. There's plenty more, but it will have to wait. If I leave you here while I go in and tell Miss Rowan and call the cops will you stay put and keep your hands off of that rope?"

"No, sir. I'm going to see Laura. I'm going to tell her if they ask her anything she better leave it out about last night."

"You are not." I was emphatic. "You've got no brand on her, you said so. You may think you know how she'll take a going-over by experts, but you don't. Every move anybody makes from now on will get on the record, and if you go and call her away from that baboon she's sitting with, what does she say and what do you say when they ask you why? She'll either leave it out or she won't, and you'll only make it worse if you tell her to. If you won't promise you'll stick here I'll just open the door and yell for Miss Rowan, and she can call the cops."

His jaw was working. "You said you believed me."

"I do. If I change my mind I'll let you know first. What you told me and what you asked me to do, I said I'd keep it in and I will, provided you do too. We were discussing the saddle. Well?"

"I figure to keep everything in. But if I could just tell her—"

"No. She probably won't spill it, but if she does and says she told you about it that won't break any bones. You left it out because you didn't want to cause her trouble. Everybody leaves things out when cops ask questions. Do I yell for Miss Rowan?"

"No. I'll stay hitched."

"Come outside and stand at the door. You've already touched the knob twice and that's enough. If anyone comes keep them off." Using my handkerchief again, I opened the door. He stepped out and I pulled the door shut as I crossed the sill. "Be seeing you," I said, and went.

I entered at the rear and glanced in at the kitchen on the chance that Lily was there. No. Nor the living room. The piano and fiddles were playing *These Fences Don't Belong*. I found her on the terrace, caught her eye and gave her a sign, and she came. I headed for the dining room, and when she had followed me in I closed the door.

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"One question," I said. "That's all there's time for. When did you last see Wade Eisler?"

She cocked her head and crinkled her eyes, remembering. I have mentioned a part of her that wasn't mine; this was a part of her that was mine. No what or why; I had asked her a question and she was digging up the answer. She took longer than Cal had.

"It was soon after you left," she said. "He put his cup down and I asked him if he wanted more coffee and he said no. Someone did want some and the pot was nearly empty and I went to the kitchen for more. Felix and Robert were arguing about when the champagne should be put on ice, and I sent Freda to the terrace with the coffee and stayed there to calm them down. Who's worrying about Wade Eisler?"

"Nobody. How long did you stay in the kitchen?"

"Oh, ten minutes. Felix can be difficult."

"Eisler wasn't there when you went back?"

"I didn't notice. They had scattered. Some of them were in the living room. Then Laura Jay told me Cal Barrow's rope was gone and I helped them look, and then people came."

"When did you notice that Eisler wasn't around?"

"Some time later. Roger Dunning wanted someone to meet him and asked me where he was. I didn't know and didn't care. I supposed he had left without bothering to thank me for the meal. He would." She tossed her head. "That's four questions. What's the point?"

"Cal Barrow was looking for his rope and found Eisler's body on the floor of the shack with the rope around his neck. He came and got me. He's there guarding the door. Will you phone the police or do you want me to?" I glanced at my wrist: four minutes after six. "It's already been sixteen minutes since I saw him and that's enough."

"No," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Wade Eisler hanged himself?"

"No. He's not hanging, he's on the floor. Also after the noose was pulled tight the rope was wound around his neck a dozen times. He didn't do that."

"But how could—who would—*no!*"

"Yes. It would be me to hand you something like this, but at that I'm glad it is. I mean, since it happened I'm glad I'm here. Do you want me to phone?"

She swallowed. "No, I will. It's my house." She touched my sleeve. "I'm *damn* glad you're here."

"Spring seven, three one hundred. I'll repeat that number: Spring seven—"

"You clown! All right, I needed it, that helped. I'll phone from the bedroom."

She moved, but I stopped her. "Do you want me to collect the

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guests and tell them the cops are coming?"

"Oh, my God. Here in my house—but of course that's routine. That's etiquette—when you're having a party and someone finds a body you collect the guests and make an announcement and say you hope they'll come again and—"

"You're babbling."

"So I am." She went, and I had to step to get to the door ahead of her.

Since a prowl car was certainly in the neighborhood there wasn't much time, and I went to the terrace and sang out, "Everybody inside! Don't walk, run! Inside, everybody!" I entered the living room and mounted a chair. I wanted to see their faces. You seldom get anything helpful from faces, especially when there are more than twenty of them, but you always think you might. Those already inside approached, and those coming from the terrace joined them. I turned to the musicians and patted the air, and they broke off. Mel Fox said in a champagne-loud voice, "She's gone and got a saddle for me." Laughter. When you've been drinking champagne for an hour laughing comes easy.

I raised a hand and waggled it. "I've got bad news." I said. "I'm sorry, but here it is. A dead body has been found on the premises. The body of Wade Eisler. I have seen it. He was murdered. Miss Rowan is notifying the police and they will soon be here. She asked me to tell you. Of course nobody will leave."

What broke the silence was not a gasp but a giggle, from Nan Karlin. Then Roger Dunning demanded, "Where is he?" and Laura Jay moved, darting to the door to the terrace and on out, and the faces I had wanted to see turned away as Lily appeared through the arch.

She came on. She raised her voice. "All right, I got you here and we're in for it. I don't go much by rules, but now I need one. What does the perfect hostess do when a guest murders another guest? I suppose I ought to apologize, but that doesn't seem . . ."

I had stepped down from the chair. It wasn't up to me to welcome the cops, it was Lily's house and she was there, and anyway it would only be a pair from a prowl car. The homicide specialists would come later. Circling the crowd, I made for a door at the other side of the room, passed through, and was in what Lily called the kennel because a guest's dog had once misused the rug there. There were book shelves, and a desk and safe and typewriter, and a phone. I went to the phone and dialed a number I could have dialed with my eyes shut. Since Wolfe's afternoon session up in the plant rooms with the orchids was from four to six, he would have gone down to the office and would answer it himself.

He did. "Yes?"

"Me. Calling from the library in

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Miss Rowan's apartment. Regarding Wade Eisler. The one with a pudgy face and a scratch on his cheek. I gathered from your expression when he called you Nero that you thought him objectionable."

"I did. I do."

"So did somebody else. His body had been found in a storage room here on the roof. Strangled with a rope. The police are on the way. I'm calling to say that I have no idea when I'll be home, and I thought you ought to know that you'll probably be hearing from Cramer. A man getting croaked a few hours after he ate lunch with you—try telling Cramer you know nothing about it."

"I shall. What do you know about it?"

"The same as you. Nothing."

"It's a confounded nuisance, but it was worth it. The grouse was superb. Give Miss Rowan my respects." I said I would.

The kennel had a door to the side hall, and I left that way, went to the side terrace, and headed for the shack. As I expected, Cal was not alone. He stood with his back against the door, his arms folded. Laura Jay was against him, gripping his wrists, her head tilted back, talking fast in a voice so low I caught no words. I called sharply, "Break it up!" She whirled on a heel and a toe, her eyes daring me to come any closer. I went closer. "You damn fool," I said, reaching her. "Snap out of it. Beat it! Get!"

"She thinks I killed him," Cal said. "I been trying to tell her, but she won't—"

What stopped him was her hands pressed against his mouth. He got her wrists and pulled them away. "He knows about it," he said. "I told him."

"Cal! You didn't! You mustn't—"

I got her elbow and jerked her around. "If you want to make it good," I said, "put your arms around his neck and moan. When I poke you in the ribs that'll mean a cop's coming and you'll moan louder and then turn and let out a scream, and when he's close enough, say ten feet, you leap at him and start clawing his face. That'll distract him and Cal can run to the terrace and jump off. Have you got anything at all in your skull besides air? What do you say when they ask you why you dashed out to find Cal when I announced the news? That you wanted to be the first to congratulate him?"

Her teeth were clamped on her lip. She unclamped them. She twisted her neck to look at Cal, twisted back to look at me, and moved. One slow step, and then she was off, and just in time. As she passed the first evergreen the sound came of the back door of the penthouse closing, and heavy feet, and I turned to greet the company. It was a harness bull.

Even when I get my full ration of sleep, eight hours, I don't break

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through my personal morning fog until I have emptied my coffee cup, and when the eight is cut to five by events beyond my control, as it was that night, I have to grope my way to the bathroom. After getting home at five in the morning, and leaving a note for Fritz saying I would be down for breakfast at 10:45, I had set the alarm for ten o'clock. That had seemed sensible, but the trouble with an alarm clock is that what seems sensible when you set it seems absurd when it goes off.

Before prying my eyes open I stayed flat a while, trying to find an alternative, and had to give up when I was conscious enough to realize that Wolfe would come down from the plant rooms at eleven. Forty minutes later I descended the two flights to the ground floor, entered the kitchen, told Fritz good morning, got my orange juice from the refrigerator, and sat at the table where my copy of *The Times* was on the rack. Fritz, who is as well acquainted with my morning fog as I am and never tries to talk through it, uncovered the sausage and lit the fire under the griddle for cakes.

The murder of Wade Eisler with a lasso at the penthouse of Lily Rowan rated the front page even in *The Times*. There was no news in it for me, nothing that I didn't already know, after the five hours I had spent at the scene of the crime with Homicide personnel, three hours at the District Attorney's office, and three hours back at the penthouse with Lily, at her request. Cal Barrow was in custody as a material witness. The District Attorney couldn't say if he would be released in time for the Tuesday evening rodeo performance. Archie Goodwin had told *The Times* reporter that he had not been at the penthouse in his professional capacity; he and Nero Wolfe had merely been guests. The police didn't know what the motive had been, or weren't telling. Wade Eisler, a bachelor, had been a well-known figure in sporting and theatrical circles. *The Times* didn't say that he had had a chronic and broad-minded taste for young women but the tabloids certainly would. And so forth.

I was spreading honey on the third griddle cake when the sounds came of the elevator jolting to a stop and then Wolfe's footsteps in the hall crossing to the office. He wouldn't expect to find me there, since Fritz would have told him of my note when he took his breakfast tray up, so I took my time with the cake and honey and poured more coffee. As I was taking a sip the doorbell rang and I got up and went to the hall for a look.

Through the one-way glass in the front door I saw a big broad frame and a big pink face that was all too familiar. The hall on the ground floor of the old brownstone is long and wide, with the walnut clothes rack, the elevator, the stairs,

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and the door to the dining room on one side, the doors to the front room and the office on the other, and the kitchen in the rear. I stepped to the office door, which was standing open, and said, "Good morning. Cramer."

Wolfe, in his oversized chair behind his desk, turned his head to scowl at me. "Good morning. I told him on the phone last evening that I have no information for him."

I had had two cups of coffee and the fog was gone. "Then I'll tell him to try next door."

"No." His lips tightened. "Confound him. That will only convince him that I'm hiding something. Let him in."

I went to the front, opened the door, and inquired, "Good lord, don't you ever sleep?"

I will never get to see Inspector Cramer at the top of his form, the form that has kept him in charge of Homicide for twenty years, because when I see him I am there and that throws him off. It's only partly me; it's chiefly that I make him think of Wolfe, and thinking of Wolfe is too much for him. When he has us together his face gets pinker and his voice gets gruffer, as it did that morning.

He sat in the red leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk, leaning forward, his elbows planted on the chair arms. He spoke. "I came to ask one question, why were you there yesterday? You told me on the phone last night that you went there to eat grouse, and Goodwin said the same. It's in his signed statement. Nuts. You could have had him bring the grouse here and had Fritz cook it."

Wolfe grunted. "When you are invited to someone's table to taste a rare bird you accept or decline. You don't ask that the bird be sent to you—unless you're a king."

"Which you think you are. You're named after one."

"I am not. Nero Claudius Caesar was an emperor, not a king, and I wasn't named after him. I was named after a mountain."

"Which you are. I still want to know why you were there with that bunch. You never leave your house on business, so it wasn't for a client. You went with Goodwin because he asked you to. Why did he ask you to? Why did you sit next to Wade Eisler at lunch? Why did Goodwin have a private talk with one of them, Cal Barrow, just before he drove you home? Why did Barrow go to him when he found the body? Why did Goodwin wait twenty minutes before he had Miss Rowan report it?"

Wolfe was leaning back, his eyes half closed, being patient. "You had Mr. Goodwin at your disposal all night. Weren't those points covered?"

Cramer snorted. "They were covered, all right. He knows how to cover. I'm not saying he knew or you knew Eisler's number was up.

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I don't say you know who did it or why. I do say there was some kind of trouble and Miss Rowan was involved in it, or at least she knew about it, and that's why Goodwin got you to go. You told me last night that you know nothing about any of those people except Miss Rowan, and your knowledge of her is superficial. I don't believe it."

"Mr. Cramer." Wolfe's eyes opened. "I lie only for advantage, never merely for convenience."

I cut in. "Excuse me." I was at my desk, at right angles to Wolfe's. Cramer turned to me. "I'd like to help if I can," I told him, "on account of Miss Rowan I was backstage at the rodeo twice last week, and it's barely possible I heard or saw something that would open a crack. It would depend on how it stands. I know you're holding Cal Barrow. Has he been charged?"

"No. Material witness. It was his rope and he found the body."

"I am not concerned," Wolfe growled, "but I remark that that would rather justify holding the others."

"We haven't got your brains," Cramer growled back. To me: "What did you hear and see backstage at the rodeo?"

"I might remember something if I knew more about it. I know Eisler wasn't there when I returned at four o'clock, but I don't know who saw him last or when. Is everybody out except the ones who were there for lunch?"

"Yes. He was there when Miss Rowan left to go to the kitchen for coffee. That was at three twenty, eight minutes after you left, as close as we can get it. No one remembers seeing him after that, so they say. No one noticed him leave the terrace, so they say. He got up from the lunch table at five minutes to three. He emptied his coffee cup at three twenty. The stomach contents say that he died within twenty minutes of that. None of the other guests came until a quarter to four. So there's three cowboys: Harvey Greve, Cal Barrow, and Mel Fox. There's three cowgirls: Anna Casado, Nan Karlin, and Laura Jay. There's Roger Dunning and his wife. You and Wolfe weren't there. Miss Rowan was, but if you saw or heard anything that points at her you wouldn't remember it. Was she at the rodeo with you?"

"I don't remember. Skip it. You've got it down to twenty minutes, from three twenty to three forty. Wasn't anyone else missed during that period?"

"Not by anybody who says so. That's the hell of it. Nobody liked Eisler. Not a single one of them would give a bent nickel to see the murderer caught. Some of them might give a good nickel to see him get away with it. This might make you remember something you saw or heard: Sunday night he took a woman to his apartment and it could have been one of the cowgirls. We haven't got a good descrip-

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tion of her, but the fingerprint men are there now. Were you at the Garden on Sunday night?"

I shook my head. "Wednesday and Saturday. What about prints in the shack?"

"None that are any good."

"Last night I mentioned that a steel rod in a rack was crosswise."

"Yeah. We might have noticed it ourselves in time. It had been wiped. He had been hit in the back of the head with it. You can read about it in the evening paper. Do you want to come down and look at it?"

"You don't have to take that tone." I was hurt. "I said I'd like to help and I meant it. You need help, you're up a stump, or you wouldn't be here. As for what I heard and saw at the rodeo, I didn't know there was going to be a murder. I'll have to sort it out. I'll see if I can dig up anything and let you know. I thought you might—"

"Why, damn you!" He was on his feet. "String *me* along? I know damn well you know something! I'll see that you choke on it!" He took a step. "For the record, Goodwin. Have you knowledge of any facts that would help to identify the murderer of Wade Eisler?"

"No."

To Wolfe: "Have you?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any involvement of any kind with any of those people?"

"No, sir."

"Wait a minute," I put in. "To avoid a possible future misunderstanding." I got my case from my pocket, took out a slip of paper, and displayed it to Wolfe. "This is a check for five thousand dollars, payable to you, signed by Lily Rowan."

"What's it for?" he demanded. "She owes me nothing."

"She wants to. It's a retainer. She asked me to go back to her place after they finished with me at the D.A.'s office last night, and I did so. She didn't like Wade Eisler any better than the next one, but two things were biting her. First, he was killed at her house by someone she had invited there. She calls that an abuse of hospitality and she thought you would. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"No argument there. Second, the daughter of District Attorney Bowen is a friend of hers. They were at school together. She has known Bowen for years. He has been a guest both at her apartment and her place in the country. And at midnight last night an Assistant D.A. phoned her and told her to be at his office in the Criminal Courts Building at ten o'clock this morning, and she phoned Bowen, and he said he couldn't allow his personal friendships to interfere with the functions of his staff. She then phoned the Assistant D.A. and told him she would call him today and tell him what time it would be convenient for her to see him at her apartment."

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"There's too many like her," Cramer muttered.

"But she has a point," I objected. "She had told you all she knew and answered your questions and signed a statement, and why ten o'clock?" To Wolfe: "Anyway, here's her check. She wants you to get the murderer before the police do, and let her phone the D.A. and tell him to come for him—or she and I will deliver him to the D.A.'s office, either way. Of course I told her you wouldn't take the job on those terms, but you might possibly consider investigating the abuse of hospitality by one of her guests. I also told her you charge high fees, but she already knew that. I bring this up now because you just told Cramer you're not involved and if you take this retainer you *will* be involved. I told Miss Rowan you probably wouldn't take it because you're in the ninety-percent bracket for the year and you hate to work."

He was glowering at me. He knew that I knew he wouldn't turn it down with Cramer there. "It will be a costly gratification of a pique," he said.

"I told her so. She can afford it."

"Her reason for hiring me is the most capricious in my experience. But I have not only eaten her bread and salt, I have eaten her grouse. I am in her debt. Mr. Cramer. I change my answer to your last question. I do have an involvement. My other answer holds. I have no information for you."

Cramer's jaw was clamped. "You know the law," he said, and wheeled and headed for the door.

When a visitor leaves the office it is my custom to precede him to the hall and the front door to let him out; but when it's Cramer and he's striding out in a huff I would have to hop on it to get ahead of him, which would be undignified; so I just follow to see that he doesn't take our hats from the shelf and tramp on them. When I emerged from the office Cramer was halfway down the hall, and after one glance I did hop on it. Out on the stoop, reaching a finger to the bell button, was Laura Jay.

I can outhop Cramer any day, but he was too far ahead and was opening the door when I reached it. Not wanting to give him an excuse to take me downtown, I didn't bump him. I braked. He said, "Good morning, Miss Jay. Come in."

I got Laura's eye and said, "Inspector Cramer is just leaving."

"I'm in no hurry," Cramer said, and backed up a step to give her room. "Come in, Miss Jay."

I saw it coming into her eyes—that is, I saw something was coming. They were at Cramer, not at me, but I saw the sudden sharp gleam of an idea, and then she acted on it. She came in all right, on the jump, through the air straight at Cramer, hands first reaching for his face. By instinct he should have jerked back, but experience is better than instinct. He ducked below her

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hands and came up against her with his arms around her, clamping her to him, leaving her nothing to paw but air. I got her wrists from the rear, pulled them to me, and crossed her arms behind her back.

"Okay," I said, "you can unwrap."

Cramer slipped his arms from under hers and backed away. "All right, Miss Jay," he said. "What's the idea?"

She tried to twist her head around. "Let me go," she demanded. "You're breaking my arm."

"Will you behave yourself?"

"Yes."

As I let go she started to tremble, but then she stiffened, pulling her shoulders back. "I guess I lost my head," she told Cramer. "I didn't expect to see you here. I do that sometimes, I just lose my head."

"It's a bad habit, Miss Jay. What time is your appointment with Nero Wolfe?"

"I haven't got an appointment."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"I don't want to see him. I came to see Archie Goodwin."

"What about?"

Before she could answer a voice came from behind Cramer. "Now what?" Wolfe was there, at the door to the office.

Cramer ignored him. "To see Goodwin about what?" he demanded.

"I think I know," I said. "It's a personal matter. Strictly personal."

"That's it," Laura said. "It's personal."

Cramer looked at me and back at her. Of course the question was, if he took us downtown and turned us over to a couple of experts could they pry it out of us? He voted no. He spoke to me. "You heard me tell Wolfe he knows the law. So do you," and marched to the door, opened it, and was gone.

"Well?" Wolfe demanded.

I tried the door to make sure it was shut, and turned. "Miss Jay came to see me. I'll take her in the front room."

"No. The office." He turned and headed for the kitchen.

I allowed myself an inside grin. Thanks to my having produced the check with Lily's offer of a job in Cramer's presence, he was actually working. When Laura and I had entered the office he would emerge from the kitchen and station himself at the hole. On the office side the hole was covered by a picture of a waterfall, on the wall at eye level to the right of Wolfe's desk. On the other side, in a little alcove at the end of the hall, it was covered by a sliding panel, and with the panel pushed aside you could not only hear but also see through the waterfall. I had once stood there for three hours with a notebook, recording a conversation Wolfe was having with an embezzler.

Laura retrieved her handbag, a big gray leather one, from the floor where it had dropped when she

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went for Cramer, and I escorted her to the office, took her jacket and put it on the couch, moved a chair for her to face my desk, swiveled my chair around, and sat. I looked at her. She was a wreck. I wouldn't have known her, especially since I had previously seen her all rigged out, and now she was in a plain gray dress with a black belt. Her cheeks sagged, her hair straggled, and her eyes were red and puffed. You wouldn't suppose a dashing cowgirl could get into such a state.

"First," I said, "why? Why did you go for him?"

She swallowed. "I just lost my head." She swallowed again. "I ought to thank you for helping me, when he asked what I came to see you for. I didn't know what to say."

"You're welcome. What do you say if I ask you?"

"I came to find out something. To find out if you told them what Cal told you yesterday. I know you must have because they've arrested him."

I shook my head. "They're holding him as a material witness because it was his rope and he found the body. I promised Cal I wouldn't repeat what he told me, and I haven't. If I did they'd have a motive for him, they couldn't ask for better, and they'd charge him with murder."

"You haven't told them? You swear you haven't?"

"I only swear on the witness stand and I'm not there yet. I have told no one, but I am now faced with a problem. Miss Rowan has hired Nero Wolfe to investigate the murder, and he will ask me for a full report of what happened there yesterday. I can't tell him what Cal told me because of my promise to Cal, and I'll have to tell him I am leaving something out, which he won't like. If Cal were available I would get his permission to tell Mr. Wolfe, but he isn't."

"Then you haven't even told Nero Wolfe?"

"No."

"Will you promise me you won't tell the police? That you'll never tell them no matter what happens?"

"Certainly not." I eyed her. "Use your head if you've found it again. Their charging Cal with murder doesn't depend only on me. They have found out that Eisler took a woman to his apartment Sunday night and they're going over it for fingerprints. If they find some of yours, and if they learn that you and Cal are good friends, as they will, he's in for it, and I would be a damn fool to wait till they get me on the stand under oath."

I turned a palm up. "You see, one trouble is, you think Cal killed him and I know he didn't. You should be ashamed of yourself. You have known him two years and I only met him last week, but I know him better than you do. I can be fooled and have been, but when he got me aside yesterday and asked me how to go about taking some hide off a

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toad he was not getting set to commit a murder, and the murder of Wade Eisler was premeditated by whoever took Cal's rope. Not to mention how he looked and talked when he showed me the body. If I thought there was a chance that Cal killed him I wouldn't leave anything out when I report to Mr. Wolfe. But I can't promise to hang onto it no matter what happens."

"You can if you will," she said. "I don't think Cal killed him. I know he didn't. I did."

My eyes widened. "You did what? Killed Eisler?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "Don't you see how it is? Of course I've got to tell them I killed him, but when they arrest me Cal will say he killed him because I told him about Sunday night. But I'll say I *didn't* tell him about Sunday night, and it will be my word against his, and they'll think he's just trying to protect me. So it *does* depend on you. You've got to promise you won't tell them what Cal told you yesterday. Because I killed him, and why should you protect me? Why should you care what happens to me if I killed a man?"

I regarded her. "You know," I said, "at least you've answered my question, why you went for Cramer. You wanted to plant the idea that you're a holy terror. That wasn't so dumb, in fact it was half bright, but now listen to you. You might possibly sell it to the cops that you killed him, at least you could ball them up a while, but not me. When I went to the shack yesterday and found you there with Cal, the first thing he said was that you thought he had killed him. And now you—"

"Cal was wrong. How could I think he had killed him when I knew I had?"

"Nuts. I not only heard what he said, I saw his face, and I saw yours. You still think Cal killed him and you're acting like a half-wit."

Her head went down, her hands went up to cover her face, and she squeezed her breasts with her elbows. Her shoulders shook.

I sharpened my voice. "The very worst thing you could do would be to try telling the cops that you killed him. It would take them about ten minutes to trip you up, and then where would Cal be? But maybe you should tell them about Sunday night, but of course not that you told Cal about it. If they find your fingerprints in Eisler's apartment you'll have to account for them, and it will be better to give them the account before they ask for it. That won't be difficult; just tell them what happened."

"They won't find my fingerprints," she said, or I thought she did. Her voice was muffled by her hands, still over her face.

"Did you say they won't find your fingerprints?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm sure they won't."

I gawked at her. It wasn't so much the words as the tone—or not

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the tone, muffled as it was, but something. Call it a crazy hunch, and you never know exactly what starts a hunch.

"You can't be sure," I said. "You must have touched something. I've been to a party in that apartment. When you entered did you stop in the hall with the marble statues?"

"No. He . . . we went on through."

"To the living room. You stopped there?"

"Yes."

"Did he take you across to look at the birds in the cages? He always does. The cages are stainless steel, perfect for prints. Did you touch any of them?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't." She had dropped her hands and lifted her head.

"How close did you go to them?"

"Why . . . not very close. I'm sure I didn't touch them."

"So am I. I am also sure that you're a liar. There are no marble statues or bird cages in Eisler's apartment. You have never been there. What kind of a double-breasted fool are you, anyway? Do you go around telling lies just for the hell of it?"

Naturally I expected an effect, but not the one I got. She straightened up in her chair and gave me a straight look, direct and steady.

"I'm not a liar," she said. "I'm not a fool either, except about Cal Barrow. The kind of a life I've had a girl gets an attitude about men, or anyway I did. No monkey business. Keep your fences up and your cinch tight. Then I met Cal and I took another look, and after a while I guess you would say I was in love with him, but whatever you call it I know how I felt. I thought I knew how he felt too, but he never mentioned it, and of course I didn't. I only saw him now and then, he was mostly up north, and when I came to New York for this rodeo here he was. I thought he was glad to see me, and I let him know I was glad to see him, but still he didn't mention it, and when two weeks went by and pretty soon we would scatter I was trying to decide to mention it myself. Then Sunday night Nan told me about Wade Eisler, how he—"

"Nan Karlin?"

"Yes. He had told her he was having a party at his apartment and she went with him, and when they got there there wasn't any party, and he got rough, and she got rough too, and she got away."

"She told you this Sunday night?"

"Yes, when she got back to the hotel she came to my room. It's next to hers. Then there was this ear." She lifted a hand to push her hair back over her left ear. "I'm telling you the whole thing. I got careless with a bronc Sunday night and got bruised by a buckle, and I didn't want to admit to Cal that I didn't know how to keep clear around a horse. So when we met for breakfast yesterday morning I told him—you know what I told him. I guess I

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thought when he heard that, how a man had tried to bulldog me, he would see that it was time to mention something. I know I was a damn fool, I said I'm a fool when it comes to Cal Barrow, but I guess I don't know him as well as I thought I did. He never goes looking for trouble. I thought he would just ride herd on me, and that would be all right, I wanted him to. I never dreamed he would kill him."

"He didn't. How many times do I have to tell you he didn't? Who else did Nan tell about it?"

"She was going to tell Roger Dunning. She asked me if I thought she should tell Roger, and I said yes, because he had asked us to go easy with Eisler, not to sweat him unless we had to, so I thought he ought to know. Nan said she would tell him right away."

"Who else did she tell?"

"I guess not anybody. She made me promise not to tell Mel."

"Mel Fox?"

"Yes. She and Mel are going to tie up, and she was afraid he might do something."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course not. I promised Nan I wouldn't."

"Well." I lifted my hands and dropped them. "You're about the rarest specimen I've ever come across. I know something about geniuses, I work for one, but you're something new, an anti-genius. It wouldn't do any good to try to tell you—"

The phone rang, and I swiveled my chair around to get it. It was Lon Cohen of the *Gazette*. He wanted to know how much I would take for an exclusive on who roped Wade Eisler and why, and I told him I did and when I typed my confession I would make an extra carbon for him but at the moment I was busy.

As I reached to cradle the receiver Wolfe's voice sounded behind me, not loud but clear enough though it was coming through the waterfall that covered the hole. "Archie, don't move. Don't turn around. She has taken a gun from her bag and is pointing it at you. Miss Jay. Your purpose is clear. With Mr. Goodwin dead there will be no one to disclose what you told Mr. Barrow at breakfast yesterday but Mr. Barrow himself, and you will deny it. You will of course be doomed since you can't hope to escape the due penalty for killing Mr. Goodwin, but you accept it in order to save Mr. Barrow from the doom you think you have contrived for him. A desperate expedient but a passable one; but it's no good now because I have heard you. You can't kill me too; you don't know where I am. Drop the gun. I will add that Mr. Goodwin has worked with me many years; I know him well; and I accept his conclusion that Mr. Barrow did not kill Wade Eisler. He is not easily gulled. Drop the gun."

I had stayed put, but it wasn't easy. Of course tingles were chasing

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up and down my spine, but worse than that I felt so damned silly, sitting there with my back to her while Wolfe made his speech. When he stopped it was too much. I swiveled. Her hand with the gun was resting on her knee, and she was staring at it, apparently wondering how it got there. I got up and took it, an old snub-nosed Graber, and flipped the cylinder. Fully loaded.

As I jiggled the cartridges out Wolfe entered from the hall. As he approached he spoke. "Archie. Does Mr. Barrow cherish this woman?"

"Sure he does. This could even key him up to mentioning it."

"Heaven help him." He glared down at her. "Madam, you are the most dangerous of living creatures. However, here you are, and I may need you." He turned his head and roared, "Fritz!" Fritz must have been in the hall; he appeared immediately. "This is Miss Laura Jay," Wolfe told him. "Show her to the south room, and when lunch is ready take her a tray."

"I'm going," Laura said. "I'm going to—I'm going."

"No. You'd be up to some mischief within the hour. I am going to expose a murderer, and I have accepted Mr. Goodwin's conclusion that it will not be Mr. Barrow, and you will probably be needed. This is Mr. Fritz Brenner. Go with him."

"But I must—"

"Confound it, will you go? Mr. Cramer would like to know why you came to see Mr. Goodwin. Do you want me to ring him and tell him?"

She went. I got her jacket from the couch and handed it to Fritz, and he convoyed her out and to the elevator. Wolfe commanded me, "Get Mr. Dunning," and went to his desk and sat. I put the Graber and the cartridges in a drawer, looked in the book for the number of the Paragon Hotel, got at the phone, and dialed. The girl said Dunning's room didn't answer, and I asked her to have him paged. When he couldn't be found I left a message, and tried Madison Square Garden, and finally got him.

Wolfe took his phone. I stayed on mine. "Mr. Dunning? This is Nero Wolfe. We met yesterday at the home of Miss Lily Rowan. Miss Rowan has hired me to investigate what she calls an abuse of her hospitality—the death by violence of one of her guests—and I would like to see you. If you will please come to my office, say at a quarter past two?"

"I can't," Dunning said. "Impossible. Anyway, I've told the police everything I know. I suppose Miss Rowan has a right to hire you if she wants to, but I don't see why . . . anyhow, I can't. It's a nightmare, this is, a nightmare, but we're going to have a performance tonight if I live that long."

"Murder hatches nightmares. Did you tell the police about Miss Karlin's visit to Mr. Eisler's apartment Sunday night?"

Silence. Five seconds.

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"Did you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That won't do, Mr. Dunning. I can ask the police that question if I must, but I would rather not. I would prefer to discuss it with you, and with Miss Karlin and Mr. Fox. If you will please be here with them at a quarter past two? A yes or no will be sufficient. It might be unwise to discuss it on the phone."

Another silence. Six seconds.

"I'll be there."

"With Miss Karlin and Mr. Fox?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll expect you." He hung up and looked at me. "Archie. Will that woman try climbing out a window?"

"No. She's hooked."

"Very well." He looked up at the wall clock. "Lunch in forty minutes. Report."

When the company arrived I wasn't there to let them in. They came five minutes early, at ten after two, and I was upstairs with Laura Jay. The south room is two flights up, on the same floor as my room, in the rear, above Wolfe's room. I left the lunch table before Wolfe finished his coffee, and mounted the two flights, partly to make sure she was still there, partly to see if she had eaten anything from the tray Fritz had taken up, and partly to tell her that Nan and Mel and Roger Dunning were expected and if Wolfe wanted her to join the party later I would either come and get her or send Fritz for her.

All three purposes were served. She was there, standing at a window, the sun setting fire to her honey-colored hair. There was only one Creole fritter left on the plate and no salad in the bowl. I had expected her to insist on going down with me instead of waiting for a summons, but she didn't. Just for curiosity I asked her if she had intended to pull the trigger as soon as I hung up or wait until I turned around, and she said I ought to know she wouldn't shoot a man in the back.

When I descended to the office they were there—Roger Dunning in the red leather chair, and Nan Karlin and Mel Fox in two of the yellow ones facing Wolfe's desk. When I entered and circled around them I got no glances; they were too intent on Wolfe, who was speaking.

". . . and the source of my information is not important. If you persist in your denial you will merely be postponing your embarrassment. The police have learned, not from me, that Eisler took a woman to his apartment Sunday night, and they are going over it for fingerprints. Almost certainly they will find some of yours, Miss Karlin, and Mr. Goodwin has told me that all of you permitted them to take samples last evening. You're in a pickle. If you refuse to discuss it with me I advise you to tell the police about it at once, before they confront you with it."

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Nan turned her head to look at Mel, and I had her full-face. Even without her pink silk shirt and Levis and boots, in a blouse and shirt and pumps, she would have been spotted by any New Yorker as an alien. The skin of a girl's face doesn't get that deep tone from week-ends at the beach or even a two weeks' trip to Bermuda.

Mel Fox, meeting her look, said "What the hell."

Nan went back to Wolfe. "Laura told you," she said. "Laura Jay. She's the only one that knew about it except Roger Dunning and he didn't."

"He *says* he didn't," Mel said. His eyes went to Dunning. "You wouldn't be letting out anybody's cinch, would you, Roger?"

"Of course not," Dunning said. It came out a little squeaky, and he cleared his throat. His narrow, bony face was just a sliver. I have noticed over and over that under strain a fat face gets fatter and a long face gets longer. He asked Wolfe, "Did I tell you?"

"No." To Nan: "You say that Miss Jay and Mr. Dunning are the only ones who knew about it. When did you tell them?"

"Sunday night when I got back to the hotel. Laura's room is next to mine and I went in and told her. I thought I ought to tell Roger and so did she, and when I went to my room I phoned him and he came and I told him."

"Why him? Are you on terms of intimacy with him?"

"With *him?* Good lord. Him?"

"The question arises. It is conceivable that he was so provoked by the outrage that he decided to kill Eisler, moved perhaps by an unavowed passion. Is it not?"

"Look at him," Nan said.

We did so. With no desire to slander him, it must be admitted that he didn't look like a man apt to burn with passion, avowed or unavowed.

"I never killed a man yet," he said. "Why Nan told me, she thought she ought to and she was absolutely right. It was partly my fault she had gone with Eisler to his apartment, I had asked the girls to let him have a little rope as long as he didn't get too frisky, I knew they could take care of themselves, and Nan wanted to tell me that if he ever came near her again she would give him worse than a scratch, and I couldn't blame her."

"Why did you ask them to give him rope?"

"Well." Dunning licked his lips. "In a way I was hog-tied. If Eisler hadn't put up the money we wouldn't have made it to New York this year, or anyhow it wouldn't have been easy. I didn't know much about him when I first signed up with him except that he had the money. Anyhow he was all right except with the girls, and I didn't know he was that kind. I knew if he didn't pull up there might be trouble, but I figured it wouldn't do any good to tell him so. What could I do? I couldn't fence him out. When

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Nan told me about Sunday night I thought that might stop him, it might show him that a girl that can handle a bronc can handle his kind."

"Did you tell him that?"

"No, I didn't. I hoped I wouldn't have to. But I decided I would keep my eyes open. Up there yesterday when I noticed he wasn't on the terrace I looked around for him some, inside and outside. When I couldn't find him and I saw all the girls were there I thought he had up and gone, and that suited me fine."

"What time was that? When you looked around and couldn't find him?"

Dunning shook his head. "I can't make it close. The police wanted me to and I did the best I could, but all I can say, it wasn't long after Miss Rowan went in for some more coffee—maybe three minutes, maybe more than that. Then when I went back in after looking outside, Cal Barrow said his rope was gone and he was looking for it, and I wondered if Eisler had took it but I couldn't guess why."

"How many people did you tell about Miss Karlin's experience at Eisler's apartment?"

"How many?" Dunning frowned. "No people at all. What good would that do?"

"You told no one?"

"No."

"And you haven't told the police?"

"No." He licked his lips. "I figured it would just sick them on Nan, and I couldn't see any sense in that. What you asked her about her and me, there's nothing to that, she's just one of the girls, but I know her pretty well and she wouldn't kill a man just because he had pawed at her. I'd like to ask you a question. You say Miss Rowan has hired you to investigate?"

"Yes."

"You weren't there when it happened, and neither was Goodwin. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"But Miss Rowan was, and she hires you. She's paying you. So you're not going to investigate *her,* naturally. I got the idea there yesterday that she didn't like Eisler any too well. I don't suppose you're interested in that? I suppose you think it has to be one of us, the boys and the girls and me?"

Wolfe grunted. He turned his head. "Archie. I haven't asked you. Did Miss Rowan kill Mr. Eisler?"

"No, sir."

"Then that's settled. Mr. Dunning, obviously it was one of you. By the way, Miss Karlin, I haven't asked you: did you kill Mr. Eisler?"

"No."

"Mr. Fox. Did you?"

"No."

"When did you first learn of Miss Karlin's visit to Eisler's apartment Sunday night?"

"Today. Two hours ago. Roger told me after you phoned him. If I'd knew about it Sunday night or yes-

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terday morning Eisler wouldn't of got killed there yesterday because he wouldn't have been there. He would of been in bed or maybe in the hospital."

"Then it's a pity you didn't know."

"Yeah. Roger told me because you told him to bring me along, he didn't know why and I don't either, but I can make a guess. You're a friend of Harvey Greve's."

"Mr. Goodwin is."

"Yeah. So Harvey tells him things. He tells him about Nan and me, that we're fixing to get hitched, which we are, and you—"

"Not Harvey," Nan said. "Laura. Laura told him. Because they've arrested Cal."

"All right, maybe Laura." Mel stared at Wolfe. "So that looks like a good setup. Eisler went after my girl and I killed him. So you tell Roger to bring me along. I understand you're about as slick as they come, you can bend a loop around a corner, but let's see you try. Here's Roger says he didn't tell anybody about Nan going there. Here's Nan says she didn't tell anybody but Laura and Roger. So I didn't know about it unless Eisler told me himself, and that don't seem practical, and he's dead. So here I am and it's your move."

"You did know about it!"

It was Laura Jay's voice and it came from the waterfall that covered the hole, which was only a couple of arms' lengths from Roger Dunning, and he jerked around. I bounced up and started for the hall, but had got only halfway when here came Laura.

She went straight to Mel and stopped, facing him, and spoke. "You know about it because I told you." She turned to Wolfe: "Yesterday. I told him yesterday morning. I thought he—"

She was interrupted. Nan flew at her and smacked her on the side of the head.

(continued on page 126)

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NEW
PASTICHE

SPY
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TALF

"Dupin," G—— whispered, in his theatrical manner, "this is quite the most important problem I have ever brought to your attention. You have no conception of the gravity of the events which might proceed from this diabolical assassination!"

A spy and "locked room" story that takes place in Paris in 182- . . . How did the suspected traitor communicate with outside assassins, give them the vital information they needed, and do it not only from a "sealed" room but in a matter of moments after the vital information first came into being?

THE ASSASSINATION OF SIR PONSONBY BROWNE

another "hitherto unpublished" tale of C. Auguste Dupin

by MICHAEL HARRISON

ON A CERTAIN JANUARY DAY IN the year 182-, my friend, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, and I were warming ourselves by the fire in our little back library, or book-closet, *au troisième,* No. 33 Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain. On the small tambour table which stood between our *fauteuils* lay that morning's *Journal des Débats,* whose pages, we had agreed, were this day of an unprecedented dullness.

Indeed, it seemed as though France had shaken off her febrile spirit of agitation and unrest, only to have fallen into a lassitude and torpidity quite foreign to the volatile nature of her people.

But a few moments after Monsieur G——, the Prefect of the Parisian police, had been announced, and had ascended (with much puffing and grumbling) to our little book-closet, we learned that this appearance of dull peacefulness which

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we had perceived throughout French affairs was, in truth, illusory, and that below, and not very far from the surface, matters of an exceedingly grave nature were striving to make themselves dangerously manifest.

I went to our old armoire and extracted a bottle of cordial and three glasses, pouring a generous measure of the spirit into each. G—— accepted the proferred glass with alacrity, for the day was cold. He had, however, retained his caped traveling coat and hat which Hyacinthe, our man-servant, had vainly tried to take from him. In his brusque fashion, G—— explained that he "did not intend to make a stay of it," but hoped we might find it convenient to accompany him, first to the Morgue, on the Quai du Marché Neuf, and then to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the corner of the Boulevard des Capucines and the small Rue Neuve des Capucines.

"If you have not already visited the new Ministry," said G——, who never missed an opportunity to impress by his superior knowledge, "you will appreciate its splendors. It belonged, as I expect you know, to the late Marshal Berthier, Prince of Wagram, and when he died, his heirs were left with something of a white elephant on their hands. Then, in 1821, the Government purchased it. It is quite spanking, I assure you!"

Dupin, with an ironic smile, murmured that he was *sure* he would be charmed to see the residence of the Major General of the *Grande Armée* once more.

"Then you have already seen it?" G—— asked, with his customary readiness to detect suspicious circumstances in everything. "May I ask when?"

"It is of no consequence," said Dupin drawlingly, ringing the bell for Hyacinthe so that the domestic might bring us our outer habiliments. "Who is this person whose body you wish us to see?"

"It is a man," said G——, with a sideways glance at Hyacinthe. "I shall explain all *later.*"

But, after we had got into G——'s fine English brougham, and the two well-matched grays were striking out briskly for the riverside, G. shook his head and added the information that were the dead man's body to consist of 170 pounds of gunpowder, he would not be more dangerous to the people of France.

"Dupin," G—— whispered, in his theatrical manner, "this is quite the most important problem I have ever brought to your attention. You have no conception of the gravity of the events which might proceed from this diabolical assassination!"

"You intrigue me, my dear G——."

"And you are pleased to mock!" said the Prefect huffily. "But this is no laughing matter, I assure you. Ah, we draw nigh to the Quai du Marché Neuf. We shall not be staying long in this dismal place; and I

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have taken the precaution to have the public excluded—we shall have the Morgue to ourselves. I merely wish you gentlemen to view the body; the ratiocination—he, he! —as you are pleased to call it, we shall keep for the Ministry. Ah, we have arrived."

The carriage stopped, the footmen jumped down with a disciplined alacrity never seen in the *employés* of private persons, unrolled the steps, opened the doors, and assisted us to alight. Wrapping his coat tightly about him, G—— strode on ahead, motioning to us to follow him through the tall, shabby doors of the Morgue.

Much as Paris may have changed in the years since the Revolution, the Morgue still retained its visible characteristics, unchanged and unchanging from decade to decade. As we entered through doors unlocked by an attendant in uniform, I saw that the high walls were still whitewashed, and that the cold, gray light still came through windows set far above the floor. Covered with coarse, badly-washed sheets, the dead lay on their familiar inclined planes, their clothes hung up near them, to aid, if possible, the identification of the corpse to which the clothes appeared to belong.

G—— addressed himself to the attendant, and the man led us to a particular plane, throwing back the sheet. The Prefect, having first dismissed the man by a gesture and then waited until he was out of earshot, pointed to the ghastly wounds with which the body was covered.

"A police-surgeon has already made a preliminary examination of the cadaver," G. said. "The man died of stabbing—the first wound killed him; it was delivered with considerable force, and even more considerable dexterity, through the heart. A second blow, through the carotid artery, might be regarded as having been delivered somewhat in the nature of an additional security, for there is no doubt that the assassin not only knew—indeed, *knows* —his business, but knew, too, that he had succeeded in killing his victim."

"And the other wounds?" Dupin asked. "This frightful extravasation of blood around the neck, obviously done with a ligature of some kind? Yet—stay!—they have a curious appearance. Ah, I have it! They were made *after* death."

"Just so," said G—— gruffly, as though disappointed that Dupin had so readily perceived what the Prefect had been about to "reveal" to us. "Just so. A crude attempt has been made to disguise the *character* of the murder—as though one were clumsily to forge the signature of another."

The sight of the dead man's mutilated corpse was so frightful that I had some ado to keep my eyes fixed upon it; but Dupin, with his reading-glass, went carefully over every square inch of the livid and bruised flesh, and at last straight-

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ened up with a sigh, putting his glass back into his pocket.

"You are right. This was no bungling murder. Whoever did the killing was as adroit in despatch as an experienced butcher. Who is the victim, by the bye?"

With a watchful glance around him, to insure that the attendant was out of hearing, G—— bent forward to whisper. "I am *almost* sure —though I hesitate to admit the truth—that we have here the body of General Sir Ponsonby Browne."

"And—except that his name clearly indicates his nationality—and who, pray, is General Sir Ponsonby Browne?"

"Sir Ponsonby," said G—— disconsolately, throwing the sheet back over the corpse, "could mean the rupture of diplomatic relations between His Britannic Majesty and our Most Christian King; he could mean the British Channel Squadron off Cherbourg and Brest; and he does mean, without any possible doubt, that English sympathy with a forthcoming French adventure will be strictly withheld—which may mean, perhaps, the postponement of the adventure."

"And to postpone the invasion of Algeria," said Dupin dryly, "will leave domestic unrest to be settled by other means than that of diverting the public's attention by a popular war?"

"I see that no one may keep secrets from you, Chevalier. But this is highly confidential, all the same, you understand? Yes, you have guessed it—General Browne was the confidential envoy sent by the British Government to hear our plans for Algeria and, of course, to hear our plea that Great Britain should not regard a French incursion into North Africa as menacing British interests in any way. In fact, we had reason to believe that General Browne was prepared to report back to his Government that France should be permitted to proceed with the expedition against Algiers. And now the General has been assassinated! First, the British confidential envoy to Vienna, Bathurst, disappeared, and the French Government was suspected of having been implicated; now we have *this* terrible affair!"

"And you wish me," said Dupin, "to find out why the General was killed?"

"Good gracious no! It is evident that he was killed in order to create grave differences between France and England. There is no mystery there."

"Then you wish me to discover who killed him?"

"Not really," said G——, in an off-handed manner, shepherding us to the door. "I have more than a shrewd suspicion that I could lay my hands on the murderer—or, at least, on the instigators of the crime —within a few hours. No," he said, ushering us into the carriage, "what I wish you to *ratiocinate*—ha, ha!—is *how* the crime was effected."

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The footmen closed the doors, and the coachman cracked his whip. "I don't mean," continued G——, "how General Ponsonby was killed. He was stabbed—I know that. What I wish to know is how his assassins discovered the route that it was decided General Browne should take when he left the Ministry; how they identified him, dressed as a petty clerk or small tradesman; and how they were ready in wait for him—only a few minutes after the entirely spontaneous decision had been taken to send him to his secret lodgings by a chance-made itinerary."

"They had a spy at hand who betrayed the General?"

"Of course. One must always reckon with the presence of a spy. By elimination, I can put my finger on him. But one takes precautions. One makes it impossible that a spy should make use of his spying until the information has ceased to be of value to his paymasters. In that case, one cares nothing for a spy.

"Yes, these precautions were taken. Only one man—not excluded by his high position from the possibility of guilt—was present at the meeting, though this man is an experienced confidential clerk in the service of the Ministry. Whether or not this man is guilty is not the chief issue. But before the secret meetings with General Browne were held, certain precautions were taken to make it impossible that the details of the deliberations be released *prematurely*."

"Pray, describe these precautions," Dupin requested.

"Well, the meetings with General Browne were held in a large room, off which there was a much smaller room—it was in this smaller room that the clerk, Marcel Privat, waited until his presence was required—to make up his journal, transcribe his notes, and so on. There is a single window in this small room, which looks upon the inner courtyard; but if you think that he may have been able to signal, with a lamp or by any other means, let me explain that between this courtyard and the Hôtel du Timbre, where all documents are stamped, is not only a very high wall, but a small street, separating the Ministry from the Stamp-Office—and the window of Privat's small room is below the level of the wall. Above the top of the wall there is no window from which a light exhibited in Privat's room could be seen. I know. I have personally checked these facts. Privat could not have signaled from the window, by day or by night."

"Did you mistrust this Privat?"

"No," said G—— carelessly, "but I took my precautions on the assumption that he might be suborned—simply because, to the disaffected, he might appear to be in a position to hear secrets."

"As, indeed, he was."

"Just so. Temptation to betray his country was taken away from him by my finding a room from which it is *impossible* for him to

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communicate with the outside."

"He could have dropped a note from the window, to be picked up by an accomplice?"

"No. The courtyard was sealed, and the paving-stones were inspected at intervals. Besides, this communicating of information had to be effected within a very—within an *exceedingly*—short time. No one, until a few moments before the General left, knew that he would leave, and no one at all knew, until the decision was actually made, by what route the General would proceed to his lodgings in the Rue de l'Université du Gros Caillou, just at the back of the Military Hospital.

"Further, three other men, dressed as was the General—and chosen by me from the Paris detective brigade because of their likeness to the General, set off at the same time. Each left by a different door, and each took a different route. The General's route—after having left the Ministry's side door in the Rue Neuve des Capucines—was along the Boulevard de la Madeleine, and then along the Rue du Surène, down the Rue des Saussayes into the Rue du Faubourg, St. Honoré, where he turned back, past the English Embassy, and so into the Place de la Concorde, and so over the Seine into the Rue de l'Université."

"How could you be certain he would follow this itinerary?"

"So that *agents-du-ville,* in civilian clothes, and stationed along the route, could keep him under surveillance. As it was, he was killed at the corner of the Avenue Gabrielle and the Rue des Champs Elysées, where poor street lighting and the trees of the Champs Elysées made it possible for the perfect ambush to be carried out. Our *agent* saw men run out, attack the General, bundle him into a carriage, and make off before the police-officer could approach the scene of the violence. When I was informed that a body was fished up the following day from the Seine, I was sure it was that of the General."

"Why do you leave it in the Morgue?"

"The British do not know yet what has happened to their General. He is safe from inquiry in the Morgue, and I may still affect ignorance of his identity. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"Amen!" I said fervently. "And the malefactors knew exactly where to post their men and organize their ambush—simply because the details of the General's spontaneously-planned itinerary had been communicated to them? So it is not the identity of the criminal which troubles you, Monsieur le Préfet, but the means by which he communicated with the assassins within a matter of minutes—of seconds, rather?"

"That, precisely, is my difficulty," said G——.

"Tell me something of this Marcel Privat," asked Dupin. "Has he a good reputation?"

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"In his work and as a private person, yes."

"How old is he?"

"Rather old for a clerk. He must be fifty. His especial talent, I gather, is that he is acquainted with several languages, including Turkish—"

"Turkish? That, surely, is an unusual accomplishment."

"He was for some years attached to our Embassy in Constantinople. No, you are right to ask me his age: he is old for so relatively junior a post; he has been passed over for promotion, and might well be a disappointed man, nursing a grudge against his superiors."

"And promised considerable promotion by those plotting the overthrow of the existing *régime?*"

"It is not unthinkable."

"It seems more than possible. Have you talked to him of his life in Turkey?"

"Yes, the matter came up. He gave satisfaction there, and expressed some regret that the Government had seen fit to recall him. He had, it appears, taken an interest in the life of the Turks. He liked life in Constantinople."

"And as soon as the arrangements had been made to get the General safely back through the streets of Paris to his lodgings, the secret details of this unpremeditated itinerary were instantly—the word is *instantly,* is it not?—communicated to the assassins? But one question: why did you consider it safe to let the General *come* to the Ministry quite openly? You did, of course, take no special precautions to guard him on his way?"

"Indeed not, my dear Chevalier. The General could have been in no danger on his way *to* the Ministry. Had he, on behalf of His Britannic Majesty's government, rejected the French plea that Great Britain adopt a sympathetic attitude toward the Algerian plan why, then, the General would have gone *from* the Ministry in no danger. The plotters would have had no cause to harm him—indeed, they would have done much to insure that he returned home safely to argue that his country not involve herself in the French adventure."

"Then," said Dupin quietly, "if I understand you right, you suggest that the General's political decision, as well as his proposed itinerary, were communicated to the plotters by some means we have yet to discover?"

"It is evident, is it not?"

"It surely seems to be so."

"And until we discover the means by which this apparently impossible communication was effected, we cannot charge Privat—why, *mille tonnerres,* we may not, in all justice, even *suspect* him!"

It was as G—— had said. Out of the large room in which General Sir Ponsonby Browne—a veteran of Waterloo, and therefore well disposed toward the French—had talked with the Minister of Foreign

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Affairs and other important persons in the Government of France, a small room opened. It had but one window, fitted with a Venetian-blind as well as with the outside wooden shutters common to most windows in Paris. The Venetian-blind was raised as we entered the room, and, as we came toward the window, we saw that a high, blank wall totally obscured the view. Above the top of this wall, liberally endowed with a multitude of sharp iron spikes, the window of no other building could be seen. One had the impression of the courtyard of a prison.

It was apparent that Privat could not have signaled to any one—unless that some one had climbed to the top of the wall, there to maintain a precarious hold, seated on some uncomfortable iron spikes. When I suggested this possibility to G——, he shook his head.

"The street the other side of the wall was patrolled; no one could have climbed to the top of the wall."

In the meanwhile, Dupin was opening two shallow cupboards which stood, one on each side of the chimney-breast. The cupboard to the right contained a small charcoal stove, coffee-pot, and similar domestic utensils connected with the making of simple refreshments. The cupboard to the left contained utensils to enable the *bonne à tout faire* to clean the rooms—brooms, feather-dusters, mops, household soap, and so forth. G—— explained that, as a precaution, the cleaning woman had been forbidden to bring such things with her, but had been ordered to take them from the cupboard in which they had been especially stored.

"At what time did Sir Ponsonby leave?" Dupin asked.

"At almost precisely 8:00 P.M. I have verified the time. One of the persons present also remembers having heard the big clock in the Chancellery, across the street here, strike the hour."

"But the decision to send General Browne by such-and-such a route—that must have been discussed and taken some minutes earlier? Five minutes earlier, say?"

"It is possible, yes."

"And because the General was taking his leave, Privat would naturally have withdrawn? Do you know for certain that he did?"

"I do not know, but it is likely."

"It is more than likely. It must be so. Very well, then: Privat now has a few minutes to communicate two facts of great importance to those who have paid him to spy. *Imprimis,* that Great Britain will support the Algerian adventure, and, *secundo, that General Browne will* be taking such-and-such a route. Of course," Dupin said musingly, "Privat would not need to detail the route—all that was necessary was the name of one street along which the General would walk. The matter of writing this down—if, indeed it had to be written down—would

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occupy no more than a few moments. But *how* did Privat communicate with his principals?"

"Do you wish me to send for him?"

"It is unnecessary. If he did indeed communicate from this room—and from which other place could he have communicated, with time so pressing?—then this room should reveal enough to indicate his method. Let us look."

Once more Dupin went over the small room, opening the drawers of the desk, opening the cupboards again. He called attention to a certain damp patch on the floor of the cupboard in which Privat's office-jacket was hanging.

"It was, I recall, a gusty, wet day —that on which the General met his end. I take it that Privat habitually carries an umbrella?"

"Yes, my inquiries elicited that fact. To tell the truth, his fellow clerks regard this Privat as something of an old woman and not without an old woman's vanity."

"How so, my dear G——?"

"Well—this is only gossip, mind—he likes to mark everything with his name. There: see the cover of that *cahier*: MARCEL PRIVAT. He cuts the stencils himself, and stencils his name on everything on which the letters can go."

"Where, then, are the stencil brushes?" Dupin asked. "I do not see them."

"Why should he leave them here? He must have taken them home—or, more probably, uses them only at home."

"This is a Ministry dossier. He would not dare take it home to stencil his name on it. The stenciling must have been done here. *Ergo,* the brushes have been here. Where are they now? And where is Privat now?"

"In another room in this building. Do you wish his presence?"

"No, not yet." Dupin picked up a feather-duster whose long handle was of a pliant bamboo-wood. Taking up this humble but necessary object, Dupin twirled it as he continue: "What I do wish is that you ask the guard on duty outside this high wall which faces us—is he available? excellent!—about the gentleman who dropped his walking-cane—I think it must have been his walking-cane—and bent to pick it up at a few minutes before eight o'clock on the night before last."

G—— was thunder-stricken; he stared at my friend as though he were unable to believe his ears. However, a process analagous to that which is called "breaking-in" by trainers of horses, had disciplined G. to the advisability of acceeding to Dupin's wishes, however fanciful they might seem.

"He is waiting outside; let us have him in."

Upon Dupin's repeating the question to the man, he, too, stared his bewilderment. But, like his master, he obeyed Dupin without question.

"How strange, sir, that you

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should know that! But, indeed, it is as you say. On the other side of the road I saw a respectably-dressed man waiting. As he was not near the wall that I had been put to guard, I saw no reason to object to his presence. I thought he must be waiting for a friend from the Hôtel du Timbre, under whose wall he was standing. I had turned away, to look in the direction of the Boulevard des Capucines, when I heard something clatter—or, it may be, tinkle. Well, gentlemen, a sort of cross between a tinkle and a clatter. It's not easy to describe the sound."

"But you saw the cause of this sound?" G—— exclaimed impatiently. "The man who was waiting had dropped his walking-cane?"

"You perceived this?" Dupin interjected quietly. "Or did the waiting man supply the explanation when you turned at the noise and saw him groping on the ground? Ah, it was *his suggestion, not yours,* that the noise you heard was that of a falling cane? Thank you. That will be all."

When the man had saluted and left the room, Dupin said, with a reflective air, "Privat sent the message. An accomplice was waiting for that message in the small street which divides this Ministry from the Hôtel du Timbre. If, my dear G——, you are about to remark, indignantly, that he cannot have thrown a message that far, you are correct. I should estimate the distance as not less than two hundred metres—some six hundred feet in the old measurement."

"Besides," said G——, with a facetious air, "it was also dark."

"Not so dark, though," said Dupin, for all the world as though G. had not spoken ironically, "that one could fail to see the two tall chimney-stacks which lie—observe!—to the right and left of us on the other side the high wall as we gaze across this courtyard."

"And why should I take note of those very ordinary chimney-pots on the roof of the Hôtel du Timbre?"

"Simply because they indicate where another accomplice stood. This Privat is an intelligent man—it is strange that he has not done better in the service. However, we shall see him in due course and shall then have our explanation. Perhaps he lacks charm of manner, or is attached to some unfashionable coterie. Who can say?

"But he *is* intelligent. For his purposes, he uses only what is readily at hand. He does not collect unusual tools to fashion his weapons, and thus collect, at the same time, evidence against himself. No. What does he use? Simple, essentially *explicable,* things. Things which would never provoke the question: 'Privat, what are you doing with this object?'

"He has had no promotion—and whether or not he really deserves promotion, he cannot, if he be a human being, feel that neglect is just.

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He has a grievance. He is ready to be suborned. But not, mark you, gentlemen, to lose what little he has gained in the Foreign service.

"So he contrives his plan only with the objects at hand—a stencil brush, an umbrella, some utensils of the cleaning woman's that he finds in the cupboard. Those and—an amusement that is very popular in Turkey.

"I see that I am mystifying you, my dear G——, and that, being mystified, you grow impatient. Take heart! I could prolong this explanation. I could ask my friend to take up a position in the street beyond that wall—at a point about six hundred feet from this window—and I could then ask you to give me some small message. I would then astonish you by transmitting the message to my friend within a matter of—literally—seconds.

"You must take my word for it that I could do this; but now, since we are sensible of the value of time, let us save some by my explaining what I could so easily demonstrate.

"You may think that I shall prove Privat's guilt by citing the clews which he has left. Indeed I shall. But I shall also ask you to observe what is *missing*. For instance, let us look at this Venetian-blind. I see that the cord which lowers and raises the blind is here, but where is the other cord, the one which controls the opening of the slats?"

"Good God! The ligature around the General's neck!"

"No," said Dupin, smiling. "That was a guess—but not a very good one. Privat would have liked to leave the blind's other cord, but he dared not. He was forced to remove it."

"Why?"

"Because he had had to cut it off, and had he rejoined it with a knot, the repair might have been seen, and questions asked. He has had to trust to chance that the loss of the cord would not be noticed."

"But you have noticed it?"

"Privat was unfortunate that you asked *me* to examine this matter. I detected the absence of the cord because I was looking for a cord. Now that I see that the cord has been cut off and is missing, I know, first, that my theory as to its use is correct, and, second, that Privat is the guilty man. For no one else could have taken it.

"However, let me explain what happened.

"Privat has prepared a paper. On it he has written something like this: *General Browne agrees/disagrees*—Privat needing to strike out only the word which is inapplicable. In addition, he has written: *General Browne will walk along*—and Privat needs only to add the name of a street or two. To complete the message, ready for transmission, Privat needs, say, five to ten seconds. The means by which the message is to be sent to the waiting assassin is ready and at hand.

"In the large room, hands are be-

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ing shaken, as General Browne prepares to leave; but the door between this room and the large one is closed, and who gives Privat, the clerk-of-all-work a thought? Certainly not the great men on the other side of the mahogany door! So thinks Privat, the embittered, as he raises the Venetian-blind, extinguishes the lamp—so that he may better see the two chimney-stacks which are his guide—takes careful aim at a point between the chimney-stacks, and shoots his message over the high wall—"

"Shoots!" fairly screamed G——, jumping up in his profound astonishment. "Shoots with *what,* for heaven's sake!"

"With a bow and arrow, of course," said Dupin coolly. "With what else?"

"The conviction that I had hit upon the correct solution was strengthened," said Dupin, "when I heard that Privat had served in Turkey, and had participated in the life of the Turks. They are, you know, the greatest bowmen in the world, and attain a proficiency with the bow which is unique. Even if Privat had not mastered the art of toxophily to the level of Turkish standards, he could not, I reflected, have been unacquainted with archery, since you informed me he had a liking for Turkish ways.

"The problem of getting the message out of what is virtually a sealed room was solved by Privat as *I* should have solved it—indeed, in the circumstances, it is the only practical solution."

"And he shot the message to his accomplice, tied to an arrow!" G—— cried, in a fine scorn. "Stuff and fiddlesticks! How could this Privat take a bow—never mind the quiver of arrows—out of this building, without at least one of my men's having seen him? No, Dupin, this time you are going too far—much too far!"

"He did not take the bow out with him."

"Then where is it? I don't see it here."

Dupin walked over to one of the cupboards. He lifted out a feather-duster and slid off the feather-head, which was joined to the shaft by means of a brass tube. He bent the pliant bamboo back and forth.

"Here is the bow. The bow-string is the missing length of cord from the Venetian-blind."

"And the arrow—?"

"Almost certainly a rib from his umbrella, to which a 'flight' of bristles cut from a stencil brush had been added, to keep it true on course. He may have used some feathers from the duster, but, since the stencil brush is missing, it seems more likely they came from that. A rib is easily removed from an umbrella, whether the rib is made of wood or metal.

"It was this improvised but efficient arrow that your guard heard, as it tinkled-clattered on the wall of the Hôtel du Timbre. I have given

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you the method; I am sure you will be able to persuade Privat to add to my story."

"I am sure of it," said G——, with ready if callous acquiescence. "But —what on earth are we to do with the English? How do we explain that their envoy has been assassinated, and that it was not our fault?"

"I really could not say," said Dupin coldly. "You asked me to tell you how a message could have been got out of this building in time to apprise the assassins of General Browne's route. I am afraid that to give you advice on the soothing of ruffled English feelings lies quite outside the limits of either my competence or my interest."

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Mr. Low tells us that he became a mystery fan only recently, and found himself reading mysteries "between classes, during study breaks, and whenever time allowed." He thinks that "perhaps mystery stories are the perfect bridge" between his pragmatic and literary interests. That is a perceptive way to explain the enduring popularity of the genre—"mystery stories are the perfect bridge" . . .

TO THE LAST DETAIL

by LOUIS GREGORY LOW

JOHNNY RAWLS QUICKLY SHIFTED his Sprite through all four gears as he left Christiansted on the one-lane road which snaked its way to St. Croix's rugged East End. His tires squalled on the damp pavement through each successive change, winning the gleaming approval of two native boys standing by the road with several goats. Rawls was pleased with the handling of the tiny Austin-Healy, but noted mentally that the added weight of the scuba tanks and all the other diving equipment crammed tightly into the seat beside him probably helped to hold down the car on curves. Considering the usual 1960 sedan provided by most small rent-a-car dealers on islands like St. Croix, the Sprite he had ordered was a real luxury.

Rawls needed fast cars and fast women, hard liquor and hard living. He was an explosive criminal lawyer who specialized in proving mobsters and corrupt officials as sweet and innocent as the girl next door. Rawls himself had married the girl next door, Laura Robert-

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son, daughter of a wealthy shipbuilder. Kind, wholesome Laura, who had trudged along always a step behind him, never quite in tune with his flamboyant way of life. The only interest they had shared was a love of the sea, especially scuba diving among the wondrously painted coral reefs of Australia and the Virgin Islands.

But for this, their lives and natures were an infinity apart. She had tried to cramp his career every step of the way, begging him to use his talent to advance rather than to abort justice. She had been a noose around his neck, an unbearable restraint to the unshackled life which he craved. Rawls felt not a pang of remorse for having killed her.

Nor did he feel the slightest fear, assured in his own mind that a more perfect crime could hardly have been executed. Like all good plans, it was basically simple, worked out to the last detail, and spiced only by Laura's idiosyncrasies which made it seem even more an accidental death. So long as no suspicions were raised, the authorities would have no reason to doubt that it was an accident, no autopsy would be performed, and he would get off scot-free. And freedom was what Rawls had longed for all these years—freedom from Laura, but not from her half-million-dollar estate.

Naturally the police had questioned him when the cruise ship docked off Fredericksted that morning. He'd had no trouble playing the role of grief-stricken husband; every outstanding courtroom lawyer must be part actor. And exactly as planned, his own description of the prior night's events was readily verified by the captain, crew, and other passengers. The brash young police lieutenant had asked penetrating questions, but Rawls had responded with quick answers.

"My wife and I had planned this trip for months," Rawls had told Lieutenant Ortiz at the dilapidated police station on St. Croix. "We were both skindiving enthusiasts, and the Virgin Islands have always been one of our favorite vacation spots."

"Why didn't you fly down here?" Ortiz inquired. "You know the liners take several days to arrive from the States."

"Well, Laura was extremely fond of ships. And we both needed a few days to relax. That Capito case had me going like crazy—"

"Yeah, I know all about it," Ortiz cut in with resentment. The lieutenant felt more than a mild dislike for tricky lawyers who nullified the hard work of honest cops. "Let's get back to last night on the ship."

Rawls spoke slowly, with courtroom conviction. "Laura had a little too much to drink, which was not unusual, especially on cruises when she liked to frolic a bit. About one o'clock she wanted to go for our

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nightly swim. So we returned to our cabin—"

"Excuse me, but some passengers said she was *very* intoxicated. Why didn't you stop her?"

"Officer, I was quite aware of Laura's condition. I am an expert swimmer and planned to accompany her in the pool."

Ortiz nodded reluctantly.

Rawls sensed that the cop disliked him, so he decided to play the "distressed husband" role, rather than continue with his typical courtroom poise.

"I'm sorry if I'm omitting some of the details you're interested in, Lieutenant, but I'm afraid this tragedy has shaken me badly. I'll try to be more—more comprehensive."

Ortiz nodded again, still dubious of the lawyer's sincerity. "Go on."

"We returned to our stateroom and put on our bathing suits. Then we had another drink, talked for a few minutes, and walked down to the pool."

Rawls laughed to himself as he recalled with satisfaction the actual sequence of events. He remembered the cold feeling he had inside when he slipped the fatal dose of poison into Laura's drink. He remembered his twinge of fear as he maneuvered his seemingly drunken wife to the side of the pool and slid the body into the water; and how conveniently two teen-agers later spotted the body in the pool, making it unnecessary for him to "discover" it himself.

"At any rate," Rawls had continued his account to Ortiz, "when we reached the pool Laura said she wanted another drink. So I told her to stay by the edge of the pool and not go into the water until I returned. When I got back to the pool with Laura's drink, two boys were lifting her body to the side. You—you know the rest. We tried to revive her but it was too late. She—she was dead."

"Well, Rawls, I guess that takes care of it." Ortiz was generally satisfied the death was accidental. He believed that Rawls was a shyster, but there was no evidence, not even any suspicion, of foul play. Besides, he had the afternoon off and was anxious to forget all about crafty lawyers, messy drownings, and disinterested witnesses. He wanted to see his girl, and sail out to Buck Island for a picnic.

"Just one more question, Rawls. Will you be staying on the island for a while?"

"Yes. Laura and I had planned to stay a week—to skindive around the island, as I said. I think I'll stay on—Laura would have wanted it that way."

"Where will you be?"

"Out at the cottages on Christine's Fancy."

"Then perhaps I'll see you there. I'm engaged to Maria Alparo, a hostess at the hotel."

Remembering the last look on Ortiz's face, Rawls chuckled to himself as he expertly drove the car

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toward Christine's Fancy on the winding, dusty South Road. Not often did one see an expression of distaste on a man's face one instant, then love the next. Ortiz must be really hooked by this Maria at the hotel. If she's anything of a looker, maybe I'll try to make some time with her. That should be adequate repayment for the cop's disdainful attitude.

Rawls was complacent. He sensed a strange communion with the island and its green mountains which slid down into the crystal sea. Shifting the Sprite into third gear as he rounded a sharp curve to the right, he awoke from his reverie and quickly raised his arm to prevent the mass of diving gear from tumbling into his lap. Straight ahead were the finely manicured grounds of Christine's Fancy, the oldest and most luxurious hotel in the Caribbean.

As he turned the car into a circular driveway leading to the impressive main building, he noticed a police car and spotted Ortiz talking to a shapely native girl on the patio. Rawls cursed to himself. Ortiz had come immediately to the hotel while he had been busy arranging the transfer of luggage from the ship to the hotel. Rawls always kept his own eye on the diving gear. He felt a stab of anxiety, seeing Ortiz, but was confident his earlier explanations had been satisfactory.

A tanned, blond fellow at a table near Ortiz rose and strode briskly toward the car. Rawls recognized him as Robert MacElroy, the assistant manager, clad in his usual all-white outfit from sneakers to immaculate shirt. MacElroy likewise recognized his guest, with whom he had spent several nights of lively drinking the previous summer. They shook hands and exchanged greetings while walking inside the pink stone building toward the main desk.

A few minutes later Rawls left the lobby with a porter and found Ortiz beside his car examining the diving gear in the seat.

"You and Mrs. Rawls must have been real enthusiastic divers," Ortiz said as Rawls approached the car. "I notice you have double tanks and a load of other gear. But surely you know the diving is poor here on the East End."

"Yes," Rawls answered. "As a matter of fact we were planning to drive around the island to several better locations. We were especially interested in the old shipwreck off Pirate's Point."

"I see." But Ortiz seemed puzzled. "Excuse me a moment."

Rawls went to the bar and ordered a double Scotch. He maintained his outward calm, but a new fear had risen inside him.

Ortiz returned shortly, his expression smug, his voice confident. "Suppose you come back to headquarters with me, Rawls. A few more points need clearing up."

"What the hell for! Can't a man

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be left alone after his wife has died without the cops climbing all over him? What's this all about?"

"It's about your car, Rawls. I called the rental agency and they said you had arranged several months ago for an Austin-Healy Sprite. It seems strange that you would *plan* to rent such a small car with so little trunk space. It couldn't possibly hold *two* persons and all that scuba gear. Just a few more questions, Rawls—and we may need an autopsy after all."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 322nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Perhaps it is more a vignette or a slice of story or what "American Magazine" used to call a "storiette"; but it has mood and is highly pictorial . . .

The author, Elsin Ann Gardner, still in her twenties, is a housewife and the mother of two children; she tells us that she is better known among her relatives as an artist and cartoonist than as a poet and short-story writer—but we'd guess the latter two are closer to her heart.

"Large streams from little fountains flow,/Tall oaks from little acorns grow." What will flow or grow from this "storiette"?

WIDE O-

by ELSIN ANN GARDNER

MAYBE I'LL PUT MY HEAD UNDER the pillow—no, that's no good at all. I can imagine him, whoever he is, sneaking up on me. Okay, that does it! I'm going to get up and stay up, put the lights on in the living room, turn on the television. Oh, I hate going into the dark . . . there! Overhead light on, floor lamp on, TV on, nice and loud. Now I'll just sit down and relax and watch the—

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Hey, what was that? Oh. Old houses creak, remember? If it creaked when Russell was here, it'll creak when he's away, and it's just —just something in the house. It's only your imagination, old girl, that's what it is. And the more sleepy you get, the more vivid your imagination will get.

All the doors are locked, right? And all the windows, ditto. Okay then. So I feel like an idiot, trying to stay up all night. Well, sitting here in the living room is a lot better than doing what I did the *last* time Russ was away overnight! Locking myself in the bathroom and staying there all night, for heaven's sake—

Oh! Oh, the furnace clicked on, that's all *that* was. Calm down, girl, calm down! The trouble with you is, you read the papers. You should read the comics and stop there. No, I have to read, *Mother of Three Attacked by Intruder* and *Woman Found Beaten to Death in Home.* But, oooh, they were so close to us! That old lady lived—what was it, only three-four blocks away? But she lived alone, and nobody knows I'm alone tonight. I hope.

What *is* the matter with me, anyway? I'm acting like a child. Other women live alone—for years, even —and here I have to stay by myself for just one measly little night, and I go all to pieces. Oh, it sure seems cold in here. The furnace was on—still is on, in fact. Must be my nerves. I'll go into the kitchen and make myself a nice hot cup of tea. Good idea! Maybe that'll warm me up.

Now where is that light switch . . . there . . . well, no *wonder* I'm cold, with the back door standing wide o-

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In which Mr. Godfrey Bodkins, London bookmaker (or turf accountant, as he prefers to call himself, though he's more familiarly known as Odds Bodkins), turns into, despite all his disclaimers, a blinkin' detective. The C.I.D. Inspector considered Bodkins "too good to be true" —well, not quite: the Inspector said, "Almost"—and he was right about that . . .

ODDS BODKINS AND THE FEATHERSTONE AFFAIR

by RICHARD CURTIS

OF ALL THE QUALITIES A GAMBLER can possess, curiosity is the most dangerous. The chap who stays in a poker game with bad cards just to see his opponent's hand is hurling himself in the teeth of the odds. It's a truth that every betting man knows, or should know. But sometimes we forget it, and the process of relearning it may be attended by some painful experiences. Like the time when, against my soundest judgment, I accepted a bad bet strictly out of curiosity and almost ended up being tried for murder.

But I'm going about this all backwards, so let me tell it proper.

You may remember the trial of Quentin Featherstone a few years ago. It didn't get much play in American newspapers, I'm told, but it was something of a *cause célèbre* here in England. The facts, briefly stated, are that Featherstone shot his wife Alicia dead on a pheasant hunt and claimed it was an accident. One of her companions, however, returning prematurely from the rest of the party, witnessed the shooting from a distance and was not entirely convinced that poor Alicia had been dispatched unintentionally. It struck a few other people as odd that so experienced a hunter as Featherstone had been so careless with firearms.

The law required that some sort of formal proceedings be instituted against him, but despite their suspicions the authorities were reluctant to prefer charges of intentional homicide. Aside from lack of witnesses, there were two very good reasons for their hesitancy.

The first was Featherstone's popularity. After making his fortune manufacturing some product or other that everybody needs in good times or bad—beds or cough syrup, something like that—he donated half of it to the Royal Society for

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the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who used the money to erect a mammoth animal hospital bearing the donor's name.

I don't know if I can impress upon you the exalted position the R.S.P.C.A. holds in the English value system, but I once heard a churchman allow that our reverence for puppies and pussycats makes ancient Egyptian animal worship innocuous by comparison. Nothing will endear a man more inextricably to English hearts than charity to dumb beasts. And it follows that a man who loves animals must be incapable of raising his voice, let alone his shotgun, in malice against his wife.

The second reason was that nobody could fathom Featherstone's motive. If Quentin and Alicia weren't exactly ardent lovers—the very notion is repulsive to any decent Englishman—they co-existed, ostensibly, in mutual respect, courtesy, and boredom. He had most of the holdings, so he could not have wanted her money. Nor did the preliminary investigation disclose any extraconnubial attachment on either side. Other than love or money I can't imagine a motive that justifies murder, and for my own part I'd be willing to eliminate love as well. But that's just my point of view.

The real trouble began when, during the hearing, a charwoman told a newspaper reporter that she had heard the Featherstones quarreling about another woman. The char didn't overhear the name of this intriguing individual, but if you're familiar with London tabloids you know how flimsy the evidence need be for them to trump up a jolly good scandal.

Featherstone, naturally, denied the whole thing vehemently, but overnight an uproar began and the authorities apologetically brought murder charges against him. He was released on bail and half the island rallied vociferously to his side. The tattling charwoman was almost attacked, and the reporter whose story had started it all was snubbed at his club. All attempts to ascertain the existence of the alleged mistress failed, and defense counsel moved that the charges be reduced to manslaughter.

No matter how small the issue, British punters will bet on it, and The Featherstone Affair, as it was called, was no exception. Sympathy for him was reflected in London betting shops, of one of which I am the proprietor. Customers backed him with 5-to-1 odds, meaning that if you believed the murder charge would never stick, you could bet five pounds and win one. Few of my customers have the kind of money necessary to win a large return on those odds, so there was no steep action in my parlor, especially as there were no takers except me, and I took the bets more as a courtesy than anything else. A lot of gents wanted to put down five or ten shillings simply to express faith in

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Quentin Featherstone's innocence, and I thought it was good public relations to accept their wagers, even if it was a sure thing I would lose a few quid.

Late one afternoon during this time, my clerk Richard escorted a chap into my office and explained that the gentleman wanted to place a large wager. "Gentleman" scarcely describes this character, whose furtive conduct put me on my guard at once. The American word "punk" would be more accurate. He was short and almost emaciated, with stringy hair and a crooked nose. He wore a brown tweed suit several sizes too large, and had a hypernervous manner, like a rodent.

"Are you Odds Bodkins?" he asked, with the clipped accent of a Lancashireman.

"Godfrey Bodkins to most people," I corrected him.

"Are you making book on this Featherstone thing?" He looked right and left apprehensively.

"I might be. What's your bet? Ten bob?"

"Three thousand pounds," he replied, almost whispering.

I sneered. "*You* have three thousand quid. Get on!"

He laid a thick envelope on my desk and undid the string. Clutching it tightly, he opened it wide enough for me to peek inside. It bulged with banknotes.

"Here, whose vault did you nick these out of?"

He snatched the parcel back. "Look, I heard you was a right sort, but if you don't want my bet—"

"Cool off, Johnny. I'm just reminding you of my obligation to refuse ill-gotten gains as wagers. If this money is clean I'll take your bet. That's three thousand against Featherstone's being convicted of murder," I muttered, jotting the figure down on a pad, "which means I pay you six hundred if you win."

But the bloke put a damp hand over mine and stopped my pen. "You've got it wrong, friend. I say he's a murderer. If I'm right you pay me fifteen thousand."

I held my breath, then squeaked, "You think he shot her intentionally?"

"That's right." His brown eyes flickered away from me.

I'm not one to turn bets like that away, but I wasn't certain this character was *compos mentis,* if you grasp my meaning. So I said, "Listen here, I don't know who's been advising you, but he's dotty if he thinks you can win that bet. Featherstone hasn't got a nasty nerve in his body. In fact, the only reason I've been taking any action on him at all is—"

But all at once, as I addressed myself to his smug face, I was struck with an enormous insight. My voice trailed off as my mind raced down a road of its own and examined the sinister conclusion at the end of it. You see, it was plain that he wasn't simply playing a hunch; he *knew*

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something. A character like that didn't take risks. He was backing a dead certainty. He had inside information.

An instinct warned me to usher him out of my shop and direct him to one of my colleagues, who are without exception a simple lot. But I was aware of another urge pressing back against the first—an ungovernable curiosity. This man knew that Quentin Featherstone was a murderer, and I wanted to know how he knew.

Of course, the big question was, was it worth £15,000 to me to find out? I should say it wasn't, but I didn't intend to take the loss. I would pass it along to my colleagues by hedging my bet. In other words, I could turn around and bet with other bookies that Featherstone would be convicted of murder. Bookies do it all the time to protect themselves from heavy losses—it's called "laying off."

It occurred to me that I might be able to get the information out of him without going to all that trouble. I'm no blinkin' detective, though, so I wasn't about to grill him or follow him or stick my neck out. I made one awkward attempt to draw him out, saying, "I'll tell you what, Mr.—what did you say your name was?"—but he merely reminded me he hadn't said what his name was, and didn't intend to unless I was prepared to do business with him.

That put a quick end to my investigation. I was afraid of losing my customer, so, uttering a silent prayer that I'd find enough bookies to lay off my bet, I said, "Okay, you're on."

He placed the bulging envelope on my desk, but kept his hands on it. "I'll want a receipt," he said.

"Certainly. But I need your name."

"Put down Barney Green."

I looked at him dubiously. "Is that your real name?"

"Let's say it's my betting name."

"What's your address?" I asked, pen poised over my client book.

"You don't need that."

I tried bluffing him. "The law demands addresses on bets bigger than five hundred pounds. Some sort of Inland Revenue requirement." He frowned and I thought he was going to withdraw. He obviously didn't want any involvement with the law.

Finally he wrote down a phone number. "Just ring this up and ask for Barney. But only in an emergency." He pocketed my receipt and left.

I picked up my phone and dialed the number; as far as I was concerned this was an emergency. A woman's voice answered, warm, smoky, sexy. I asked for Barney. She told me he was out. "To whom am I speaking?" I asked casually.

"I might ask the same of you," she replied.

Thwarted, I told her I was a business acquaintance and would call

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back later. I rang off hastily, my hands trembling. I had no wish to pursue the investigation farther for the moment. But I was able to draw one conclusion: that was no landlady I'd talked to.

It was closing time, so I sent my clerks home, did my day's bookkeeping, took a bite of dinner, and, refreshed, went back to my office to make one more phone call. I rang up a friend who works at the telephone exchange. He frequently brought his custom to my shop and owed me a favor for a couple of good tips I'd given him. I gave him Barney's phone number and asked him to find out what the address was. It took him more than an hour, but at last he rang back and gave me an address in Hammersmith.

I was tempted to have a look that very evening, but the day's efforts had exhausted me. Tomorrow, first thing after laying off Barney's bet, I'd go out to Hammersmith, and if my nerve held up, make the acquaintance of the lady with the smoky voice. I took the bus home and slept like a top, and next morning tripped out of my flat with high hopes—right into the gentle hands of two C.I.D. men who escorted me into a waiting police car.

I was interrogated by a cordial gray-haired chap. "What do you know about Barney Keith?"

"Alias Green?"

"Here's his picture." He pushed a photo across the desk. The rodent-like features were unmistakable.

"He placed a bet with me just yesterday," I said, beginning to feel that warm pride that comes with performing a civic duty. The Inspector produced the receipt I'd given Barney. I confirmed it was mine.

"What was the nature of the bet?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but that's by way of being privileged goings-on," I protested politely.

He straightened in his chair and gave me a thoroughly menacing look. But whatever he was going to say he held back for the moment and put another question to me instead. "Do you know this woman?"

He offered me the photo of a smashing redhead. "I'm sorry to say I don't," I sighed. Then I remembered something. "Wait a moment. Does she have a kind of foggy voice?"

"Yes, that's it."

"I spoke to her briefly on the phone yesterday. I wanted to talk to Barney about his wager. She didn't even tell me her name."

"Sandra Baker," the Inspector offered.

"Who is she? To him, I mean."

"More to the point, who is she to you, Bodkins?"

"I haven't a clue!"

He leaned forward. "Do you own a gun?"

"Blimey no!" I cried. "Say, before we carry this any farther, Governor, do you mind telling me why you brought me here?" My confidence

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deflated quickly as I began to suspect they were not interrogating me as a friendly witness.

The Inspector nodded to a detective, who explained, "Barney Keith was found murdered last night, about eight hours after depositing three thousand pounds with you. We think there's a connection between the two events."

I was so thunderstruck it felt as if hours went by before I could bring myself to speak. But during that interval my mind managed to grasp a lot of thread-ends and tie them into a very compact knot. I took command of my quivering nerves and decided that I was actually in no danger and, if my reasoning proved correct, I could explain everything satisfactorily. But before doing so there was something I had to take care of.

"I believe I'm entitled to make one phone call before saying anything further," I said coolly.

The Inspector gestured to the phone on his desk, but I objected to lack of privacy, so he had a detective take me to a little cubicle where I made my call. Then the detective brought me back to the Inspector's office where I announced, "I'd like to make a statement."

"You may wait until your counsel arrives," he reminded me.

"It wasn't my solicitor I rang up," I said. He shrugged and called for a stenographer. When he was ready I said, "I've got this theory. If I'm wrong I'm in a lot of trouble. But I'm willing to lay five to one I'm right."

"You've already got one serious charge hanging over you," the Inspector said. "Don't compound it by operating an illegal gambling establishment right here at police headquarters."

"No, sir. Well now, my theory is that this redhead, this Sandra Baker, was carrying on a love affair with the wrong kind of man—a married man. They were discreet about it, though, and nobody knew what they were about—until one day this Barney Keith found out. I'm not sure how he recognized them—maybe he knew her from before, or maybe he knew her boy friend from his pictures.

"At any rate, I figure Barney bumped into them coming out of an out-of-town hotel or something. Barney drew a conclusion—a nasty conclusion, but the right one. The idea of blackmail probably occurred to him then, but he decided not to act on it too hastily.

"But one day Barney saw his opportunity ripen, and he put the squeeze on both of them. He forced his attentions on Sandra, probably prevailing on her to let him move in with her. And he started wringing money out of the boy friend. But the boy friend had reason to believe Barney would double-cross him, so he hunted him down and shot him."

"It sounds typical," the Inspector commented drily.

"It does until you know a bit more

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about the boy friend," I replied. "You see, my theory is that he had wanted to divorce his wife and marry Sandra. But his wife said no. So he took the opportunity of a pheasant shoot to eliminate her. He trained his shotgun on a bird, but didn't have a clear shot because his wife's head obstructed the line of fire. That didn't seem to deter him. He claims it was an accident. But one bettor out of five in London is saying he did it on purpose, saying he did it for a woman. The odds would be closer if they could find the woman, but nobody seems to know her name. Odds Bodkins says her name is Sandra Baker."

The Inspector and the detective were gaping at me, and the stenographer was so astonished he'd stopped his transcription halfway through. "Now, Bodkins," the Inspector said, his voice trembling with anger as if I were playing a joke on him, "you know very well your reference to a 'boy friend' can apply to only one man. Do you really expect us to believe that rot?"

"Next thing, he'll be accusing poor Quentin Featherstone of the Gunpowder Plot," said the detective sarcastically.

"I told you, I'll give five to one."

"I'll put ten quid on that!" the detective said impulsively.

The Inspector glared at him, then said to me, "Let me understand you, Bodkins. You're telling us Keith was the only soul alive who knew Quentin Featherstone and Sandra Baker were involved with each other. When the row began over Featherstone's shooting his wife, Barney threatened to tell the world about Sandra Baker, which would probably clinch a homicide conviction. Featherstone paid Keith to keep quiet, but just to make sure Keith would never talk, Featherstone murdered him. Is that your theory?"

It was a slight oversimplification. Barney had squeezed as much money out of Featherstone as he could—£3000. But Barney knew he could win five times that amount by taking the 5-to-1 odds on a Featherstone conviction. So he placed his bet with me and planned to disclose Featherstone's affair with Sandra soon afterwards—making an anonymous phone call to the police or something. But Featherstone got to him before he could do so. I didn't think it necessary to disclose this part of it to the police, so all I said to the Inspector was: "That's good detective work, Governor."

He looked fit to kill me. "I'm going to have Featherstone brought in for questioning," he said, shaking a sharp forefinger at me, "but I warn you: if your story turns out to be as preposterous as it sounds, I will pursue my original hypothesis—that *you* killed Barney Keith."

"Why would *I* kill him?"

"So you wouldn't have to pay some large gambling debt to him," he said triumphantly. I gulped. That explanation made a frighten-

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ing lot of sense. I spent an anxious day in detention, waiting for the outcome. But that night the Inspector showed up, his thin lips stretched in a smile. "Tell me, Bodkins, just how did you draw your conclusions?"

"Let's just say Barney Keith talked too much when he came to my shop yesterday. Featherstone confessed it all, did he?"

"Yes. He was so surprised he broke down at once. He couldn't imagine how we connected him with Barney's murder. He thinks Sandra Baker talked."

"His mistake was in not providing for the deductive genius of Godfrey Bodkins, turf accountant and part-time sleuth," I boasted.

"I'm afraid, however, that you'll be poorly rewarded for your trouble," the Inspector said, not without some satisfaction. "You'll have to give back the three thousand pounds Keith bet with you; he acquired it by extortion, and his wager is therefore not valid."

"Ah, that's a pity," I sighed. "But it's just as well. I wouldn't want to profit from human misery."

He looked at me strangely. "A magnanimous bookie," he said. "Bodkins, you're almost too good to be true."

He had me pegged accurately enough: I *was* too good to be true. Remember that phone call I made earlier in the day? Well, knowing I would eventually be exonerated, I saw no sense in wasting the call on a solicitor. So I had rung up my clerk Richard instead. I instructed him to call every bookie we knew and bet as heavily as possible that Featherstone would be convicted of murder.

My clerk managed to place £1500 before the newspapers broke the story of Featherstone's confession. At 5-to-1 I earned 7500 quid, so I didn't really mind having to pay back Barney's 3000.

I'm not completely venal, though. I sent a check for ten quid to the R.S.P.C.A.

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THE RODEO MURDER

by REX STOUT

(*continued from page 98*)

Somehow when two women tie into each other it's harder to separate them than it is two men. It's not just that you don't want to hurt a woman if you can help it; they're actually more wriggly and you're more apt to get scratched or bit; and when it's two active cowgirls it's a real problem.

However, I had help. Roger and Mel were closer than I was, and Roger had Laura's shoulders, and Mel had Nan around the waist, when I reached them. They yanked them apart, and I merely stepped in between. Laura wriggled free from Roger, but I was there. Mel had Nan wrapped up.

"Pfui," Wolfe said. "Miss Jay, your talent for turmoil is extraordinary. Archie, put her—"

"She's a liar," Nan said. She was panting a little, and her eyes were blazing. "I knew it was her. I knew she—"

"Hold it, Nan," Mel commanded her. His eyes were narrowed at Wolfe. "So you had it rigged good, huh? So you had her all primed, huh?"

"I did not." Wolfe was emphatic. "This is becoming farcical. You were right, up to a point, Miss Karlin. Miss Jay, concerned on account of Mr. Barrow, came to see Mr. Goodwin, to tell him of your experience at Eisler's apartment. She stated that you made her promise not to tell Mr. Fox, and that she had kept the promise. Thinking it well to have her at hand, I had her shown to a room upstairs and told her to stay there. Her abrupt entry surprised me as much as you. Miss Jay, did you tell Mr. Goodwin that you had not told Mr. Fox?"

"Yes." Laura's chin was up.

"But you now say you had?"

"Yes."

"Precisely where and when?"

"Yesterday morning at the hotel. In the lobby after breakfast."

"You had breakfast with Mr. Barrow. Was he present?"

"No. He went to buy some cigarettes, and I saw Mel there and went and told him."

"Look here, Laura," Mel said. "Look at me."

Her head came around, slowly, and she met his eyes, straight.

"You know darned well that ain't so," he said. "This slicker talked you into it. He told you that was the way to get Cal out of trouble Didn't he?"

"No."

"You mean you can stand there and look me in the eye and lie like that?"

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"I don't know, Mel, I never tried."

"Listen, Laura," Roger Dunning said, to her back. "If it's on account of Cal, I don't think you have to. I've got a lawyer on it and he'll soon have him out on bail, thirty thousand dollars. He may be out already. They can't charge him with murder unless they can show some reason why he wanted to kill Eisler, and there wasn't any."

"It's not just her," Mel said. He had backed Nan up and moved in front of her. He turned to me. "You're slick too, huh?"

"Not very," I said. "I manage somehow."

"I bet you do. I bet you're pretty good at answering questions. What if I asked you where you was yesterday while someone was killing Eisler?"

"That's easy. I was driving a car. Driving Mr. Wolfe home and then back to Sixty-third Street."

"Was anybody else along?"

"Nope. Just us two."

"Did you see anybody on the way that knows you?"

"No."

"Did anybody here see you except Wolfe?"

"No, I didn't come in. I wanted to get back in time for the roping—I mean the contest, not roping Eisler. You're asking pretty good questions, but you'll hit the same snag with me as with Cal Barrow. You'll have to show some reason why I wanted to kill Eisler."

"Yeah. Or why Wolfe would want you to, the man you work for. Or why that Miss Rowan would, the woman that's hired him." He turned to Wolfe. "You better look out with this Laura Jay. She ain't cut out for a liar." He turned to Laura. "I'll be having a talk with you, Laura. Private." He turned to Roger Dunning. "This lawyer you got to get bail for Cal, is he any good?"

Roger's long narrow face was even longer. "I think he's all right. He seems to know his way around."

"I want to see him. Come on, Nan. You come along. We're not going to get—"

The doorbell rang. Mel had Nan under control, so I went. A glance through the glass of the front door showed me a hundred and ninety pounds of sergeant out on the stoop —Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide. I proceeded, put the chain bolt on, opened the door to the two-inch crack the chain permitted, and said politely, "No clues today. Out of stock."

"Open up, Goodwin." Like a sergeant. "I want Nan Karlin."

"I don't blame you. She,s very attractive—"

"Can it. Open up. I've got a warrant for her and I know she's here."

There was no use making an issue of it, since there had probably been an eye on the house ever since Cramer left. As for the warrant, of course the prints she had left at Eisler's apartment had caught up with her. But Wolfe doesn't approve of

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cops' taking anyone in his house, no matter who. "What if you brought the wrong warrant?" I asked.

He got it from a pocket and stuck it through the crack, and I took it and looked it over. "Okay," I said, "but watch her, she might bite." Removing the chain, swinging the door open, and handing him the warrant as he crossed the sill, I followed him to the office. He didn't make a ceremony of it. He marched across to Nan, displayed the paper, and spoke. "Warrant to take you as a material witness in the murder of Wade Eisler. You're under arrest. Come along."

My concern was Laura. As like as not, she would blurt out that he should take Mel too because she had told him about it, so I lost no time getting to her, but she didn't utter a peep. She stood stiff, her teeth clamped on her lip. Wolfe let out a growl, but no words. Nan gripped Mel's arm. Mel took the warrant, read it through, and told Stebbins, "This don't say what for."

"Information received."

"Where you going to take her?"

"Ask the District Attorney's office."

"I'm getting a lawyer for her."

"Sure. Everybody ought to have a lawyer."

"I'm going along."

"Not with us. Come on, Miss Karlin."

Wolfe spoke. "Miss Karlin. You will of course be guided by your own judgment and discretion. I make no suggestion. I merely inform you that you are under no compulsion to speak until you have consulted an attorney."

Stebbins and Mel Fox both spoke at once. Stebbins said, "She didn't ask you anything." Mel said, "You damn snake." Stebbins touched Nan's elbow and she moved. I stayed with Laura as they headed out, Nan and Stebbins in front and Mel and Roger following; seeing them go might touch her off. She still had her teeth on her lip. When I heard the front door close I went and took a look and came back.

I expected to find Wolfe scowling at her, but he wasn't. He was leaning back with his eyes closed and his lips moving. He was pushing out his lips, puckered, and then drawing them in—out and in, out and in.

He only does that, and always does it, when he has found a crack somewhere, or thinks he has, and is trying to see through. I am not supposed to interrupt the process, so I crossed to my desk, but didn't sit, because Laura was still on her feet, and a gentleman should not seat himself when a lady or a wildcat is standing.

Wolfe opened his eyes. "Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"It would help to know whether Miss Jay had told Mr. Fox or not. Is there any conceivable way of finding out?"

I raised a brow. If that was the crack he had been trying to see

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through he was certainly hard up for cracks. "Not bare-handed," I said. "It would take a scientist. I know where you can get one with a lie detector. Or you might try a hypnotist."

"Pfui. Miss Jay, which is it, now that Miss Karlin is in custody? Had you told Mr. Fox?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday morning in the hotel lobby?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you understand what that will let you in for—or rather, I suppose you don't. You will be—"

The phone rang. I got it. "Nero Wolf's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is Cal, Archie. Do you know where Laura is?"

"I might have an idea. Where are you?"

"I'm at the hotel. I'm out on bail. They say she went out this morning and she hasn't been back, and she's not at the Garden. I thought maybe she might have been to see you."

"Hold the wire a minute. I'll go to another phone."

I got my memo pad, wrote on it, *Cal Barrow out on bail looking for Laura, get him here & you can check her,* tore off the sheet, and handed it to Wolfe. He read it and looked up at the clock. His afternoon date with the orchids was at four.

"No," he said. "You can. Get her out of here. Of course you must see him first."

I resumed at the phone. "I think I know where to find her. It's a little complicated, and the best way—"

"Where is she?"

"I'll bring her. What's your room number?"

"Five-twenty-two. Where is she?"

"I'll have her there in half an hour, maybe less. Stay there."

I hung up and faced Laura. "That was Cal. He's out on bail and he wants to see you. I'll take—"

"Cal! Where is he?"

"I'll take you to him, but I'm going to see him first. I don't ask you to promise because you'd promise anything, but if you try any tricks I'll show you a new way to handle a calf. Where's your jacket?"

"It's upstairs."

"Go get it. If I went for it you might not be here when I came back."

The Paragon Hotel, around the corner from Eighth Avenue on 54th Street, not exactly a dump but by no means a Waldorf, is convenient for performers at the Garden. When Laura and I entered there were twenty or more cow-persons in the lobby, both male and female, some in costume and some not. We went to the elevator, and to my surprise she stuck to the program as agreed on in the taxi, getting out at the fourth floor to go to her room. I stayed in, left at the fifth, found Room 522, knocked on the door, and it opened before I was through knocking.

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"Oh," Cal said. "Where is she?"

He was still in the same outfit he had worn yesterday—bright blue shirt, blue jeans, fancy boots. His face wasn't any fresher than his clothes.

"She's in her room," I said. "She wanted to fix her hair. Before she joins us I want to ask you something. Do I see a chair in there?"

"Why, sure. Come on in and sit." He gave me room and I entered. There were two chairs, about all there was space for, what with the bed and chest of drawers and a little table. I took one. Cal stood and yawned, wide.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm a little short on sleep."

"So am I. Some things have been happening, but Laura can tell you about them. Miss Rowan has hired Nero Wolfe to investigate, and he knows about what you told me yesterday. Laura can tell you how he found out. I haven't told the cops or anyone else."

He nodded. "I figured you hadn't or they would have asked me. I guess you've got your tongue in straight. I'm mighty glad. I guess I picked the right man to tell."

"Frankly, you could have done worse. Now you can tell me something else. Yesterday morning you met Laura downstairs and had breakfast with her. Remember?"

"Sure I remember."

"Mel Fox says that when you and Laura went into the lobby after breakfast you left her and went to the cigar counter to buy cigarettes, and he went and had a little talk with you. Remember that?"

"I don't seem to." He frowned. "I didn't buy no cigarettes. I got a carton here in my room. Mel must of got mixed up."

"I'd like to be sure about this, Cal. Go back to it, it was only yesterday. You and Laura had breakfast in the coffee shop?"

"Yes."

"Then you went into the lobby together. If you didn't leave her to buy cigarettes, maybe it was to buy a paper. The newsstand is—"

"Wait a minute. We didn't go into the lobby. We left the coffee shop by the street door. We went down to the Garden."

"Then it might have been when you came back. You went into the lobby then."

"We didn't come back. When we left the Garden we went up to that Miss Rowan's. I guess you might tell me why this is so particular. What does Mel say we talked about?"

"You'll know pretty soon. I had to be sure—"

There was a knock at the door and he lost no time getting to it. It was Laura. She was running true to form. We had agreed on fifteen minutes, and it had been only ten. The reunion was mighty dramatic. Cal said, "Well, hello." Laura said, "Hello, Cal." He stood aside so she wouldn't have to brush against him.

I arose and said, "You fudged a little but I expected you to."

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Cal shut the door and came and said, "Gosh, you look like you got throwed by a camel."

I took command. "Look," I told them, "when I leave you'll have all the time there is, but now I've got some talking to do and you can listen. Sit down."

"You've already talked," Laura said. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing yet but I'm going to. If you don't want to listen I know who will—Inspector Cramer if I phone him and say I'm ready to unload. Sit down!"

Laura sat in the other chair. Cal sat on the edge of the bed. "I guess you got the drop on us, Archie," he said. "I hope you don't feel as mean as you sound."

"I don't feel mean at all." I sat. "I'm going to tell you a love story. I take valuable time to tell it because if I don't God only knows what Laura will be up to next. Yesterday she told you a colossal lie. Today she told me she killed Wade Eisler. Then she—shut up, both of you! Then she pointed a loaded gun at my back and would have plugged me if she hadn't been interrupted. Then she told another lie, trying to frame Mel Fox for the murder."

"No!" Laura cried. "That was the truth!"

"Nuts. You and Cal didn't go to the lobby after breakfast. You went to the Garden and from there to Miss Rowan's. You didn't tell Mel Fox what you said you did. You were framing him, or trying to."

"You're talking pretty fast," Cal said. "Maybe you'd better slow down and back it up a little. If you can. What was the lie she told me yesterday?"

"That she had gone to Eisler's apartment Sunday night. She hadn't. She has never been there. It was Nan Karlin that Eisler took there Sunday night, and Nan told Laura about it when she got back to the hotel. Laura told you *she* had been there for two reasons: she didn't want to admit she had been careless about a horse and got her ear bruised, and the real reason, she hoped it would make you realize it was time to break out the bridle. All for love. You are her dream man. She wants to hook you. She wants you to take her for better or for worse, and she has done her damnedest to make it worse."

"I didn't say that!" Laura cried.

"Not in those words. Was that why you told him that lie or wasn't it? Try telling the truth once."

"All right, it was!"

Cal stood up. "You might go and leave us alone a while. You can come back."

"This is a respectable hotel. A gentleman isn't supposed to be in his room alone with a lady. I'll go pretty soon, after I fill in a little. Sit down. She came today and told me she killed Eisler because she thought you had—she still thinks so—and it was her fault and she wanted to take the rap. When I showed her that wouldn't work she

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took a gun from her bag—she had thoughtfully brought it along—when my back was turned, and got set to let me have it, the idea being that I was the only one who knew you had a motive. She can tell you why that didn't work either. Then—"

"She wouldn't of shot you," Cal said.

"The hell she wouldn't. Then Mel and Nan and Roger came, and she got another idea. She announced that she had told Mel about Nan going to Eisler's place Sunday night, the idea being to give Mel a motive for killing Eisler. She said she told him yesterday morning when you and she went to the lobby after breakfast and you went to buy cigarettes. I have now stepped on that one." I turned to Laura. "You'd better see Mel and tell him. Tell him you had a fit."

I returned to Cal. "Of course that's fairly thick, trying to dump a murder on a guy, but after all, she would have dumped it on herself if she could. She tried that first, so I admit I should make allowances. I'm telling you all this for three reasons: first, so you'll know what she's capable of and you'll head her off. No one else can. If she keeps on having ideas there'll be hell to pay and you'll probably do the paying. Second, I want you both to realize that whoever killed Eisler is going to get tagged, and the sooner the better. It's one of six people: Nan Karlin, Anna Casado, Harvey Greve, Mel Fox, and Ruger Dunning and his wife. If you know of any reason, anything at all, why one of them might have wanted Eisler dead, I expect you to tell me and tell me now."

"You say Laura still thinks I killed him," Cal said.

"She may be losing her grip on that. After the way her other ideas have panned out she must be shaky on that one." I looked at her. "Make it hypothetical, Laura. If Cal didn't, who did?"

"I don't know."

"What about Harvey Greve? He's a friend of mine, but I'll overlook that if he's it. Could he have had a motive?"

"I don't know."

"What about Roger Dunning? Did Eisler make passes at his wife?"

"If he did I never saw him. Neither did anybody else. She's not—well, you saw her—why would he? With all the girls to paw at. She must be nearly fifty."

Ellen Dunning probably wasn't a day over forty, but I admit she was a little faded. I turned to Cal. "Your turn. If you didn't kill him who did?"

He shook his head. "You got me. Does it have to be one of them six?"

"Yes."

"Then I pass. I just couldn't guess."

"It will take more than a guess. My third reason for taking up your time, not to mention mine: I wanted

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to have another look at you and listen to you some more. You're the only one with a known motive, and I'm the one that knows it. Nero Wolfe has bought my conclusion that you're out, and I haven't told the cops, and if I'm wrong I'm sunk. Besides, Laura would have the laugh on me, and I'd hate that. Did you kill him?"

"I'll tell you, Archie." He was actually grinning at me, and there was nothing but me between him and a murder trial. "I wouldn't want her to have the laugh on me, either. And she won't."

"Okay." I got up. "For God's sake keep an eye on her. Do you know Harvey's room number?"

"Sure. He's down the hall. Five-thirty-one."

I went.

Knocking on the door of Room 531, first normal and then loud, got no result. I intended to see Harvey. He might be down in the lobby, and if he wasn't I would try the Garden. There was no hurry about getting back to the office, since it was only four thirty and Wolfe wouldn't be down from the plant rooms until six.

Taking the elevator down, I found that there were more people in the lobby than when I came. Moving around, I didn't see Harvey, but I saw a man I knew, standing over in a corner chinning with a couple of cowboys. It was Fred Durkin. Fred, a free-lance, was second-best of the three operatives whom Wolfe considers good enough to trust with errands when we need help on a job. I looked at my watch: 4:34. Nearly an hour and a half since I had left with Laura, time enough for Wolfe to get Fred on the phone, brief him, and put him to work. Had he? Of course it could be that Fred was there on a job for one of the agencies that used him, but that would have been quite a coincidence and I don't like coincidences.

That question would have to wait for an answer. Knowing that Harvey Greve liked a drink when one was handy, I crossed the lobby and entered the bar. The crowd there was smaller but noisier. No Harvey, but there were booths along the wall, and I strolled back for a look, and found him. He was in a booth, deep in conversation with a man. Neither of them saw me, and I went on by, circled and backtracked, returned to the lobby, and on out to the street.

The man with Harvey was Saul Panzer. Saul is not only the first-best of the three men Wolfe uses for errands, he is the best operative south of the North Pole. That settled it. Fred could have been a coincidence, but not both of them. Wolfe had got busy on the phone the minute I was out of the house, or darned soon after. What had stung him? No answer.

At Ninth Avenue I flagged a taxi. When I gave the hackie the number on West 35th Street, he said, "What

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a honor. Archie Goodwin in person. Your name in the paper again but no pitcher this time. Stranglin' a guy with a lasso right on Park Avenue, can you beat that? Whodunit?"

I'm all for fame, but I was too busy guessing to smirk.

The hackie had another honor coming. When the cab rolled to a stop in front of the old brownstone and I climbed out, a man appeared from behind a parked car and spoke to him. It was Sergeant Purley Stebbins. He said to the hackie, "Hold it, driver. Police." He said to me, "You're under arrest. I've got a warrant." He took a paper from a pocket and offered it.

He was enjoying it. He would have enjoyed even more to see me squirm, so I didn't. I didn't bother to look at the paper. "Information received?" I asked politely. "Or just on general principles?"

"The Inspector will tell you. We'll use this cab. Get in."

I obeyed. He climbed in beside me and told the driver, "Two-thirty West Twentieth," and we rolled.

I chose to snub him. He was of course expecting me to try some appropriate cracks, so of course I didn't. I didn't open my trap from the time I climbed in the cab until he ushered me into the office of Inspector Cramer, which is on the third floor of the dingy old building that houses the precinct. I didn't open it even then. I waited until I was in a chair at the end of Cramer's desk, and he said, "I've been going over your statement, Goodwin, and I want to know more about your movements yesterday afternoon. The District Attorney does too, but I'll have a go at it first. You left with Wolfe, to drive him home, at twelve minutes after three. Right?"

I spoke. "It's all in my statement, and I answered a thousand questions, some of them a dozen times. That's enough. I am now clamming, unless and until you tell me why I am suddenly grabbed. If you think you dug up something, what?"

"That will develop as we go along. You left with Wolfe at three twelve?"

I leaned back and yawned.

He regarded me. He looked up at Stebbins, who was standing. Stebbins said, "You know him. He hasn't said a word since I took him."

Cramer looked at me. "A woman phoned headquarters this afternoon and said she saw you there yesterday at half-past three on the terrace in the rear of the penthouse. She was sure about the time. She didn't give her name. I don't have to tell you that if Wolfe came home in a taxi we'll find the driver. You left with him at three twelve?"

"Thanks for the warning. What time did the woman phone?"

"Three thirty-nine."

I looked at it. Laura and I had got to the hotel about twenty-five to

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four. The first thing on my program when I got loose would be to wring her neck and toss her in the river. "Okay," I said, "naturally you're curious. You say the D.A. is too, so it will be a long discussion. I'll talk after I make a phone call. May I use your phone?"

"In my hearing."

"Certainly, it's your phone."

He moved it across and I got it and dialed. Fritz answered and I asked him to buzz the plant rooms. After a wait Wolfe's voice came, cranky, as it always is when he is interrupted up there.

"Yes?"

"Me. I'm with Cramer in his office. When I got home Stebbins was waiting for me out front with a warrant. A woman, name unknown, phoned the police that she saw me at half-past three yesterday afternoon on Miss Rowan's terrace. If you think you'll need me tomorrow you'd better get Parker. Of the two contradictory statements you sent me to check, the first one is true. Tell Fritz to save some of the veal knuckle for me. He can warm it over tomorrow."

"At half-past three yesterday afternoon you were with me in the car."

"I know it, but they don't. Cramer would give a month's pay to prove I wasn't."

I hung up and sat back. "Where were we? Oh, yes. I left with Mr. Wolfe at three twelve. Next question?"

At 10:39 Wednesday morning, standing at the curb on Leonard Street waiting for an empty taxi, I said to Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer, "It's a dirty insult. Did you say five *hundred?*"

He nodded. "It is rather a slap, isn't it? As your attorney, I could hardly suggest a higher figure. And of course the cost will be much—here comes one." He stepped off the curb and raised an arm to stop an approaching cab.

The insult, having my bail set at a measly five C's, one-sixtieth of Cal Barrow's, was merely an insult. The injuries were what I would some day, preferably that one, get even for. I had spent fourteen hours in a detention room with too much heat and not enough air; I had asked for corned-beef sandwiches and got ham and rubbery cheese; I had been asked the same question over and over by four different county and city employees, none of whom had a sense of humor; I had been served lukewarm coffee in a paper thing that leaked; I had not been allowed to use the phone; I had been told three times to take a nap on a bumpy couch and had been roused for more questions just as I was fading out; and I had been asked to sign a statement that had four mistakes in content, three misspelled words, and five typographical errors.

And at the end of it all, which must have cost the taxpayers at least a thousand bucks, counting over-

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head, they were exactly where they had been when they started.

After climbing out of the taxi in front of the old brownstone and thanking Parker for the lift, I mounted the stoop, let myself in, and headed for the office to tell Wolfe that I would be available as soon as I had showered, shaved, brushed my teeth, cleaned my nails, brushed my hair, dressed, and had breakfast. It was five minutes past eleven, so he would be down from the plant rooms.

But he wasn't. The overgrown chair behind his desk was empty. Four of the yellow chairs were grouped in front of his desk, facing it, and Fritz was emerging from the front room carrying two more of them. On the couch at the far side at right angles to my desk two people sat holding hands—Cal Barrow and Laura Jay. As I entered Cal jerked his hand away and stood up.

"We came a little early," he said. "We thought you might tell us what's up."

"Roping contest," I said. "I run down the block and you snare me from the stoop. Orchids for prizes." I turned to Fritz. "There's a mermaid in the sink." I wheeled and went to the kitchen, and in a moment he came.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"In his room with Saul and Fred. Your tie's crooked, Archie, and your—"

"I fell off a horse. Having a party?"

"Yes. Mr. Wolfe—"

"What time?"

"I was told they would come at half-past eleven. The lady and gentleman on the couch—"

"Came early to hold hands. Excuse my manners, I spent the night with louts and it rubbed off on me. I've got to rinse it off. Could you possibly bring up toast and coffee in eight minutes?"

"Easy. Seven. Your orange juice is in the refrigerator." He went to the range.

I got the glass of juice from the refrigerator, got a spoon and stirred it, took a healthy sip, and headed for the hall and the stairs. One flight up, the door of Wolfe's room was at the left, but I kept going and mounted another flight to my room, which was to the right, at the front of the house.

Ordinarily, what with my personal morning fog, it takes me around forty minutes to get rigged for the day, but that time I made it in thirty, with time out for the juice, toast and jam, and coffee. When Fritz came with the tray I asked him to tell Wolfe I was there, and he said he had done so on his way up, and Wolfe was pleased. I don't mean Wolfe said he was pleased; Fritz said he was. Fritz thinks he is a diplomat. At 11:42, cleaner and neater but not gayer, I went down to the office.

They were all there, all of Lily's Monday luncheon guests but Wade Eisler. Lily was in the red leather

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chair. Cal and Laura were still on the couch, but not holding hands. The other six were on the yellow chairs—Mel Fox, Nan Karlin, and Harvey Greve in front, and Roger Dunning, his wife, and Anna Casado in the rear. Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin were off at the side, over by the big globe.

Wolfe, at his desk, was speaking as I entered. He stopped to dart a glance at me. I halted and inquired politely. "Am I intruding?"

Lily said, "You look pretty spruce for a man who spent the night in jail."

Wolfe said, "I have told them why you were delayed. Now that you're here I'll proceed." As I circled around the company to get to my desk he went on, to them, "I repeat, I have been employed by Miss Rowan and am acting in her interest, but I am solely responsible for what I am about to say. If I defame I alone am liable; she is not. You are here at my invitation, but you came, of course, not to please me but to hear me. I won't keep you longer than I must."

"We have to be at the Garden by a quarter after one," Roger Dunning said. "The show starts at two."

"Yes, sir, I know." Wolfe's eyes went right and then left. "I think it likely that one of you won't be there. I am not prepared to say to one of you, 'You killed Wade Eisler and I can prove it,' but I can offer a suggestion. All of you had the opportunity and the means; you were there, the steel rod was there, the rope was there. None of you was eliminated with certainty by a check of your movements. I made no such check, but the police did, and at that sort of thing they are inimitable. So it was a question of motive, as it often is."

He pinched his nose with a thumb and forefinger, and I suppressed a grin. He is convinced that when a woman is present, let alone four of them, the air is tainted with perfume. Sometimes it is, naturally, but not then and there. I have a good nose and I hadn't smelled any on the cowgirls, and you have to get a good deal closer to Lily than Wolfe was to catch hers. But he pinched his nose.

He resumed. "From the viewpoint of the police two facts pointed to Mr. Barrow: it was his rope and he found the body. Rather, it seemed to me, they pointed away from him, but let that pass. He had a motive, but no one knew it but Miss Jay and Mr. Goodwin. If the police had known it he would have been charged with murder. I learned of it only yesterday, and I ignored it because Mr. Goodwin told me to. He was convinced that Mr. Barrow was innocent, and he is not easy to convince. Mr. Barrow, you and I are in his debt—you because he saved you from a mortal hazard, and I because he saved me from wasting time and trouble on you."

"Yes, sir," Cal said. "That's not

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all I owe him." He looked at [illegible] and for a second I thought he was going to take her hand in public, but he reined in.

"I also learned yesterday," Wolfe went on, "that Miss Karlin had a motive, and, according to Miss Jay, that Mr. Fox had one. But later Miss Jay recanted. Miss Jay, did you tell Mr. Fox of Miss Karlin's experience at Eisler's apartment?"

"No. I must have been—"

"The 'no' is enough. But you did phone the police yesterday that you saw Mr. Goodwin on Miss Karlin's terrace at *half-past three* Monday afternoon?"

"What?" Laura stared. "I never phoned the police anything!"

"You must have. It is of no consequence now, but—"

"I phoned the police," Roger Dunning said. "I phoned them and told them that because it was true, and I thought they ought to know."

"But you didn't identify yourself."

"No, I didn't. I was afraid to. I didn't know what they might do because I hadn't told about it before. But I thought they ought to know."

I wouldn't have dreamed that the day would ever come when I would owe Laura an apology.

"I doubt," Wolfe said, "if you have earned their gratitude. Certainly not mine or Mr. Goodwin's. To go back to Mr. Fox—by the way, Miss Karlin, you were released on bail this morning?"

"Yes," Nan said.

"You were questioned at length?"

"I certainly was."

"Did they worm it out of you that you had told Mr. Fox of your visit to Eisler's apartment?"

"Of course not! I *hadn't* told him! He didn't know until yesterday!"

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Do you confirm that, Mr. Fox?"

"I sure do." Mel was on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his head tilted up. "If this is the suggestion you said you'd offer you can stick it somewhere."

"It isn't. I'm merely clearing away the brush. Even if you and Miss Karlin are lying, if she did tell you, it can't be proven. Therefore it is impossible to establish a motive for you. No, that is not my suggestion. I only—"

"Wait a minute," Roger Dunning blurted. "I've held off up to now, but I might have known I couldn't forever. I told Mel about it—about Nan going to Eisler's place and what he did."

"When?"

"I told him Sunday night. I thought he ought to know because I knew he—"

"You're a dirty liar. Get on your feet." Mel was on his. Dunning's chair was right behind his, and Mel had turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, Mel," Dunning said. "I'm damn sorry, but you can't expect—"

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"On your feet!"

"That won't help any, Mel. That won't—"

Mel smacked him on the jaw with his open hand, his right, and his left was on the way to countersmack him as his head swayed, but Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin were there. I was up, but they were closer. They got his arms and backed him up and turned him, and Wolfe spoke.

"If you please, Mr. Fox. I'll deal with him. I know he's lying."

Mel squinted. "How the hell do *you* know he's lying?"

"I know a cornered rat when I see one. Move your chair and sit down. Saul, see if Mr. Dunning has a weapon. We don't need any melodrama."

Dunning was on his feet, eyes focused on Wolfe. "You said Miss Rowan's not responsible," he said, louder than necessary. "You said you are." He turned to Lily. "You hired him. I advise you to fire him quick."

Lily looked at me. I shook my head. Fred moved behind Dunning and took his arms, and Saul went over him. Mel Fox moved his chair away and sat. Cal said something to Laura, and Anna Casado spoke to Harvey Greve. Saul turned and told Wolfe, "No gun."

Dunning said to his wife, "Come on, Ellen, we're going." She reached and grabbed his sleeve.

Wolfe spoke. "You are not going, Mr. Dunning. When you do go you will be under escort. I repeat, I can't say to you, 'You killed Wade Eisler and I can prove it,' but I do say that the probability of your guilt is so great that I stake my reputation on it. I must confess that this is impetuous, but your motive couldn't be established without warning you; and I wished to gratify a caprice of my client, Miss Rowan, who invited me to her table for a memorable meal. She wants to deliver you to the District Attorney. Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin will go along to give him some information they have gathered. You are going willy-nilly. Do you want to challenge me here and now?"

Dunning turned his head to see where his chair was, and sat. He pulled his shoulders up and lifted his chin. "What information?" he asked.

"I'll tell you its nature," Wolfe said. "I doubt if the District Attorney would want me to give you the particulars. But first, what fixed my attention on you? You did—something that you said when you were here yesterday morning. I didn't worm it out of you, you volunteered it, that on Monday at Miss Rowan's place you noticed that Mr. Eisler wasn't on the terrace and you looked around for him, inside and outside. I asked you when, and you said—I quote you verbatim: 'It wasn't long after Miss Rowan went in for some more coffee—maybe three minutes, maybe more than that.' That was entirely too

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pat. Mr. Dunning. You were accounting for your absence in case it had been remarked by anyone, and more important, you were accounting for your appearance in the rear of the penthouse in case you had been observed. And you did it gratuitously; I hadn't asked for it."

"I said it because it was true." Dunning licked his lips.

"No doubt. But it suggested the question, what if, instead of looking for him, you were killing him? What if, having got the rope from the closet and concealed it under your jacket, you got Eisler to go with you to that shack on some pretext, or to meet you there? That attracted me. Of the persons there you were the only one whose absence during that period could be established; you yourself avowed it. But then the question, what impelled you? Had you had a cogent motive? To avenge his misconduct with Miss Karlin or with another woman or women?"

Wolfe shook his head. "That seemed unlikely, though not impossible. More probably it had been some other factor of your relations with him. But when I put Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin on your trail I told them to explore all avenues, and they did so. They found no hint that you had a personal interest in any of the young women Mr. Eisler had pestered, but they gathered facts that were highly suggestive. By the way, a detail: on the phone last evening I asked Miss Rowan if you knew of that shack in the rear of the penthouse, and she said that you not only knew of it, you had been in it. You went there on Sunday to make sure that the terrace would be cleared of obstructions so the ropes could be manipulated, and she took you to the shack to see the grouse that were hanging there. Is that correct, Miss Rowan?"

Lily said yes. She didn't look happy. Since it was beginning to look as if she was going to get her money's worth, she should have been pleased, but she didn't look it.

"That's a lie," Dunning said. "I didn't know about that shack. I never saw it."

Wolfe nodded. "You're desperate. You knew I wouldn't arrange this gathering unless I had discovered something of consequence, so you start wriggling; you try to implicate Mr. Fox, your word against his—then you deny you knew of the shack, your word against Miss Rowan's. Indeed, you started wriggling yesterday, when you had your wife phone the police in an effort to implicate Mr. Goodwin. Probably you have learned that something has been taken from your hotel room. Have you inspected the contents of your suitcase since ten o'clock last evening? The old brown one in the closet that you keep locked?"

"No." Dunning swallowed. "Why should I?"

"I think you have. I have reason

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to believe that an envelope now in my safe came from that suitcase. I have examined its contents, and while they don't prove that you killed Wade Eisler they are highly suggestive of a possible motive. I said I'll tell you the nature of the information I have but not the particulars. However, you may have one detail."

Wolfe's head turned. "Mr. Greve. You told Mr. Panzer that in the past two years you have purchased some three hundred horses, two hundred steers and bulls, and a hundred and fifty calves, in behalf of Mr. Dunning. Is that correct?"

Harvey didn't look happy either. "That's about right," he said. "That's just rough figures."

"From how many different people did you buy them?"

"Maybe a hundred, maybe more. I scouted around."

"How did you pay for them?"

"Some I gave them a check, but mostly cash. They like cash."

"Your own checks?"

"Yes. Roger made deposits in my account, eight or ten thosand dollars at a time, and I paid out of that."

"Did Mr. Dunning tell you not to divulge the amounts you paid for the animals?"

Harvey screwed up his mouth. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I, but I am earning a fee. You are exposing a man who made you a party to a swindle and who is almost certainly a murderer. Did he tell you not to divulge the amounts?"

"Yes, he did."

"Has anyone asked you to?"

"Yes. Wade Eisler. About ten days ago. I told him Roger had all the records and he'd have to ask him."

"Did you tell Mr. Dunning that Mr. Eisler had asked you?"

"Yes."

"That's a lie," Dunning said.

Wolfe nodded. "Again one person's word against yours. But I have the enelope, and I have the names of three other men who have made purchases for you under similiar arrangements, and Mr. Durkin and Mr. Panzer have spoken with them. Two of them were asked for figures recently by Wade Eisler, as was Mr. Greve. I don't know how much you cheated Eisler out of, but from the contents of the envelope I surmise that it was many thousands." His head turned. "Saul and Fred, you will escort Mr. Dunning to the District Attorney's office and deliver the envelope and the information you have collected. Archie, get the envelope from the safe."

I moved. As I passed behind Dunning's chair he started up, but Saul's hand on one shoulder and Fred's on the other stopped him. As I opened the safe door Wolfe said, "Give it to Saul. Miss Rowan, do you want Mr. Goodwin to phone the District Attorney to expect you?"

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I had never seen Lily so completely got. "Good lord," she said, "I didn't realize. You couldn't drag me. I wish I hadn't . . . No, I don't . . . but I didn't realize how—how *hard* it is."

"You're not going?"

"Of course not!"

"You, Mr. Greve? You might as well. If you don't you'll be sent for later."

"Then I'll go later." Harvey was on his feet. "We've got a show on." He looked at Cal and Mel. "What about it? Think you can handle a calf if I hold his tail?"

"But we can't," Nan Karlin said. "Just go and—we *can't!*"

"The hell we can't," Cal Barrow said. "Come on, Laura."

One snowy morning in January I got a letter from Cal that read: Dear Archie:

You used them two dots like that when you wrote me on the typewriter so if you can I can. I read in the paper today about Roger Dunning getting convicted and Laura said I ought to write you and I said she ought to and she said did I want her writing letters to the man she should have married instead of me: and so it went. Remember when I said about that blowout I didn't want to stink it up, well it sure got stunk up. We are making out pretty well here in Texas but it is cold enough to freeze the tits on a steer if he had any. Laura says to give you her love but don't believe it. Best regards.

Yours truly:
Cal

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a *NEW* and stunning story by

CELIA FREMLIN

Celia Fremlin has a "touch"—especially about people whose inner characters we either recognize or understand. Here is her newest story —a very subtle story that could have been titled, for more than one reason, "Iceberg" . . .

THE BETRAYAL

by CELIA FREMLIN

MAISIE ALLEN'S LIPS STRETCHED in a tight little smile of satisfaction as she surveyed the poky suburban house with its prim lace curtains. So *this* was what Mark had come to after thirty years! Mark, with his gay, defiant opinions, his much-vaunted scorn of convention—the godlike Mark had come to this in the end!

It was the end, of course. The unspecified female relative who had written to Maisie in a crabbed and elderly hand had made that perfectly clear, in spite of the circumlocutions in which such a statement must decently be couched. Mark had at most a few more months to live, and he wanted to see his old friend Maisie Allen before he died; that was the gist of the letter which Maisie now fingered almost lovingly with her tight black glove.

The triumph of it! Mark, who had once thought that he owned the world, that he owned Maisie and could demand of her anything he liked; Mark who now lay dying in this genteel-ly squalid street with only some aged cousin to look after him. Not even a wife or family to show for all that proud young strength! A little secret smile hovered round Maisie's mouth as she rang the bell.

The female relative had retired, still dimly chattering, down the dim linoleumed stairs, and Maisie was left to enter the bedroom alone. She hesitated—not from any fear of what she might feel at the sight of her former lover, alone and dying after thirty years, but from some uncertainty as to whether or not to keep on her hat and gloves. Both were becoming—the hat, in particular, with its crisp little brim, was a valuable addition to the ever more complicated apparatus necessary for making people exclaim that she didn't look a day over for-

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ty. The gloves too—everyone knows that well-chosen gloves can do a lot for a woman past her first womanhood.

On the other hand, it would be nice for him to notice, as he lay there with his once all-dominating, all-demanding body ruined and shrunken, that *her* hair was still yellow and shining, that *her* hands were still white and beautifully manicured. She couldn't actually *show* him her luxurious house in Richmond, or her prosperous stock-broker husband, but she'd soon get them into the conversation.

"Maisie?"

The voice from the bed did not sound either broken or humble, and Maisie was momentarily irritated and taken aback. Then she recovered herself, cautiously made her face light up with the smile which showed her top teeth but not her less natural-looking bottom ones, and approached the bed. Her confidence flowed warmly back at the sight of the gaunt figure leaning against the pillows.

Mark's looks were gone; his fire was gone; the blue eyes whose glance had once made her forget everything else on earth—well, not quite everything, thank goodness, or she wouldn't now be living in that expensive house in Richmond—those eyes had faded to a lusterless, bloodshot gray.

"How are you, Mark?" she inquired brightly, and added, "I've brought you some flowers."

She dumped the twelve red roses onto the bed. Something cheaper would have done equally well, but she had only remembered at the last minute that one is supposed to bring an invalid something, and roses were all that was left in the shop.

She waited for him to thank her, to look her up and down and tell her she looked as beautiful as ever, to ask her how she was getting on—all the remarks one has a right to expect in such a situation. But he didn't say any of these things. He simply gazed at the flowers lying on the blanket in front of him, as if in deep thought.

Suddenly he spoke, with a curious flash of the old arrogance—an arrogance that had no right to survive in so changed a body.

"Let me see your hands, Maisie. I haven't seen your hands for thirty years."

Startled, Maisie removed her gloves and held out her hands, palms downward so that the perfectly polished nails whould show to best advantage. Sharply he turned them over and looked at the palms.

"Why, Maisie!" he said, in tones of gentle surprise, "They're still beautiful!"

He looked up at her in a sort of bewilderment, and Maisie bristled with annoyance. Still beautiful, indeed! And why shouldn't they be, she'd like to know? Anyone else would have told her that *she* still

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looked beautiful—not a day over forty.

She forced a smile back onto her face—the condescending one this time. He must be made to realize how completely the tables were turned since they last were together.

"Shall I put the flowers in water for you?" she inquired briskly.

"Yes! Oh, yes, please!" he said, with a vehemence that made her start. "And when you've done that," he went on, with a strange, tense eagerness, "I'm going to ask you to do something else for me."

As Maisie poked the roses one after another into the hideous glass vase produced by the relative from some dank cupboard downstairs, she was conscious of Mark's eyes on her all the time. No, not on *her* —on her hands; and she flashed her diamonds and nail polish as well as she could without actually pricking herself on those beastly stems.

"Do you remember, Maisie, the last time I watched you arranging red roses in a vase?"

He spoke slowly, with his eyes on her hands as if he were asking the question of them rather than of her. "Red roses. I'd brought them to you. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen—your hands moving among the flowers." He stopped. "I asked you for something then, Maisie, which you never gave me. Now I am going to ask you for something else—something you may find it easier to give."

Maisie eyed him guardedly, and he went on, "I just want you to get me the bottle of sleeping tablets from the bathroom. The doctor won't let me have them within reach—nor will Cousin Edie. Mine is a painful complaint, you know," he added gently, "and there is no one else I can ask to help me. I promise you nothing will happen till you are safe at home again. No one will be able to blame you. Please, Maisie, just get them for me. It won't take you a moment. In remembrance of the roses, all those years ago."

Maisie stared at him, scandalized. Was there no limit to the outrageous demands this man would make on her? Once it had been demands that no respectable girl could submit to—and now this! Expecting her to abet him in an actual *crime!*

She drew herself up—and then faltered. If she refused point-blank there would be a scene, and she had long ago had enough scenes with Mark to last her a lifetime. Better humor him—pretend she couldn't find them, or something . . . With face averted she hurried off and found the bathroom.

A fine array of bottles there, and no mistake! Cousin Edie must have almost as many things the matter with her as Mark himself! But she saw the bottle Mark meant—two of them, in fact—one nearly full, the other empty.

It was the empty one that gave

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her the idea—the clever, amusing idea that would get her so neatly out of the whole business. All she had to do was fill it with tablets that looked similar but were really harmless—in all this collection there must be something that would do. Then she could take it to Mark and he'd never know the difference until—well, until *she* was safely out of the house.

Ah, the very thing—vitamin tablets. They looked almost the same, and one could take dozens of them and come to no harm. Giggling like a schoolgirl, she tipped a number of them into the empty bottle, patted her make-up in the bathroom mirror, and then, scarcely able to keep a straight face, returned to the bedroom.

How his face lit up! Maisie could have giggled aloud when he snatched the bottle from her like a starving man and stuffed it under his pillow, when he kissed her white hand over and over again, with tears of gratitude in his eyes.

"You must go now, my love, my darling!" he cried, in a choked voice. "You must get away from this house, safe home again, before I take them. And listen, Maisie. All the days of your life my blessing will follow you. Wherever my soul may be in all this wide universe, it will never forget what you have risked, what you have done for me today. Tonight, as the last, blessed drowsiness steals over me, I shall lie here looking at your roses, thinking of your white hands. They shall be my last thought—the brave and lovely hands that have given me my release . . ."

Really, it seemed as if he'd never get to the end of his speech. Maisie almost had to stuff her handkerchief into her mouth to keep from laughing outright. Honestly, it was killing! To think of him lying here tonight, gazing soulfully at red roses and lapping up vitamin tablets!

Once she was safe outside in the street, Maisie stood and laughed until her sides ached.

It wasn't until the next day, when she heard that Mark Wilkinson had died in the night from an overdose of sleeping tablets, that she realized the silly mistake she must have made. She'd just put the bottle down for a moment while she had touched up her face, and then in her hurry she must have picked up the wrong one—the one with the *real* sleeping tablets in it—and given it to him!

Maddening! Such a clever trick it would have been, and it would have kept her completely safe and out of trouble! How was it that her hands, her beautiful hands, should have so betrayed her?

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Beware of having a drink with a stranger . . .

DON'T I KNOW YOU?

by HENRY SLESAR

THE MAN WAS WELL-GROOMED, IN a sleek, furry way midway in style between Broadway and Bond Street. His hands were buried in the deep pockets of his camel's-hair coat, and he blew a frosty breath of winter past his mink mustache as he waited for the light to change.

The other man, smaller, not so well-groomed, his brown tweed overcoat threadbare in comparison, looked at him sharply, looked away, looked back, and was finally rewarded by an answering stare, equally puzzled and involved.

They crossed the street together, matching stride for stride, and then stopped at the opposite corner and looked at each other again. The mustached man cracked the silence first, with a smile and the words:

"Don't I know you?"

It took the smaller man a longer time to thaw. He said, "I sure as heck think I know *you*. Only I can't remember—"

"Carmody's the name," the mustached man said, in a manner suggesting the click of heels or the presentation of a card. Actually, he didn't move his well-shined shoes or remove his hands from his pockets.

"My name's Siegel," the smaller man said. "Frank Siegel. And if we *do* know each other—"here he finally managed the smile—"it must have been a heck of a long time ago. You don't come from Michigan, by any chance?"

"Never been there," Carmody said. "But I've traveled a lot. South mostly, Florida, the Caribbean, southern Europe. I like the sunshine —hate this beastly cold." He said the adjective without a hint of English accent.

"No," Siegel said. "Never been to any of those places."

"School, maybe? No, I suppose not. I went to Washington and Lee."

"City College."

"Must have been some place," Carmody said. "The more I look at you, the surer I am."

"Same with me," Siegel said.

"Look," Carmody said, searching the east and west of the street, "I'm in no great hurry, are you? We could stop for a drink—nice warm bar—puzzle it all out."

"Well," Siegel said uncertainly. But he wasn't in a hurry. "All right," he finished. "One drink."

They chose a small uncrowded cocktail lounge on 50th Street and

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took a booth in the rear. Carmody had a martini, and Siegel, who didn't like liquor much, had a beer. He was content to let Carmody do the probing of the past.

"Mutual friends, maybe?" Carmody said. "Know anybody named Martin? My life is loaded with people named Martin. No? How about George LeRoy? Carl Kramer? Lillian Dietz?"

Siegel kept shaking his head. He began to feel tired, and even to lose interest, until Carmody said, "Well, I know one thing. We don't have the same occupation." He lifted his glass. The gin twinkled and so did his eyes. "I'm a thief," he said.

Siegel's eyebrows met. "How do you mean that?"

"Why, literally, my friend, literally," Carmody said. "I'm a member of a vanishing species. A good thief. Society thief. Used to be the darling of the fiction writers and Sunday supplements—but no more."

"You're kidding me," Siegel said, in an injured voice.

"No, I wouldn't do that," answered Carmody. "I steal for a living. Steal very nice, pretty things, with high price tags. Only from people who can afford it, of course —that's my one principle."

He took his left hand out of his pocket for the first time. There was a jeweled bracelet in the hand. Rows of neat diamonds made blue daggers of light in the darkened booth.

"Beautiful, isn't it? Belonged to a widow who hasn't worn it in fifteen years. I'm doing everybody a favor by restoring it to circulation."

"And you really stole this bracelet?"

"This morning," Carmody smiled. "It was very easy, really. And of course, now I'll sell it—to anybody who wants it. I'll even sell it to you."

"I couldn't buy something like that," Siegel said.

"Maybe you could. I'd guess that it's worth, oh, five, six thousand dollars. You could have it for five, six hundred, whatever you could afford."

"You really mean this?"

"Of course," Carmody said. "It's the least I can do for an old friend." The smile broadened, showing most of his good teeth. "Even if I can't remember who you are."

Siegel sighed. It was a sigh of regret. He reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He opened it lengthways to show Carmody something else that glittered, even if dully. It was his police badge.

"I'm a detective," he said, with genuine sadness. "I'm sorry, Mr. Carmody, but I'll have to place you under arrest."

Carmody's facial muscles gave a twitch of surprise. He groaned slightly, and put the "diamond" bracelet into the ashtray. He was plainly distressed, but he forced himself to restore a shadow of his lost smile.

"Of course," he said. "*Now* I remember where I know you from."

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a *NEW* procedural by

JOE GORES

In his nine months with Daniel Kearny Associates, Larry Ballard had become a damned good field agent, but he still didn't know how to really dig *on a skiptracing case—especially when it was a Gypsy investigation . . . another true-to-life fictional documentary—this one about a long-slow-deadline of a case that could be happening this morning . . .*

FILE #4: LINCOLN SEDAN DEADLINE

by JOE GORES

DAN KEARNY LAUGHED AND SAID, " 'Bye!" in a bright and jocular voice. Then he tossed the receiver toward the phone and cursed aloud in his basement cubbyhole at DKA. That made it just a perfect morning.

Item: the new receptionist had blithely let in a process server, and Kearny had been slapped with a damage-suit summons.

Item: Marty Rossman had lost a repossessed auto from the tow-bar coming down Cathedral Hill, and had wiped out three parked cars.

Item: Kathy Onoda, Office Manager ever since Kearny had quit Walter's Auto Detectives nearly eight years before to form Daniel Kearny Associates, was off sick again. Hell, she was run-down from a full-time job, two kids, and supporting a deadbeat husband, but it still put them in a bind. Now this!

Kearny jabbed Giselle Marc's intercom button viciously; as it buzzed upstairs in clerical, he shook a cigarette from his pack and lit it. He was a hard, pugnacious man with a square face and icy gray eyes; his slightly bent nose and massive jaw gave him the look of an aging middleweight club fighter.

"Yes, Dan," said Giselle musically. She was a tall stimulating blonde, 24 years old, whose looks kept most men from realizing that her wits matched her other attractions. Kearny was one of the few who wasn't fooled.

"Who's the field agent on this Jennifer Poteet skip?"

"Larry Ballard."

"Where the hell is—" He broke off; through the one-way glass of his cubbyhole he had seen Ballard entering the garage. "Skip it."

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"Dan, don't you jump on Larry! This is a Gypsy case, and you know what Gypsy cases are."

"Somebody oughta tell Lou Cassavette at Crescent Lincoln-Mercury what Gypsy cases are, so he doesn't get on the horn to blow smoke at me about making California-Citizens Bank eat this one because it won't be back before the deadline. So I—" He caught himself, but not in time.

"Dan, did you bet Lou Cassavette that we'd have that car back?"

"Bet?" he asked innocently. "Why, I—yeah. Fifty iron men. Hell, I won at the track Saturday." Over her expostulations he hung up, buzzed Ballard. "Get in here—with your case file," he growled.

Larry Ballard, tall and energetic and in his mid-twenties, had a surfer's build and sun-bleached hair. He reminded Kearny of himself twenty years before at the same age: smart, ready to work around the clock, slowly gaining the successful investigator's necessary detachment. In his nine months with DKA, Ballard had become a damned good field agent; but he still didn't know how to really dig on skip cases. He'd learn on this one.

Kearny offered a cigarette, began silkily, "Ballard, what are *you* DOING ON *JENNIFER POTEET?*" His voice thumped the words like a ring opponent's jaw.

"I—well, er—that's a tough one, Da—Mr. Kearny."

"It's a deadline deal, Ballard." Kearny's voice was deceptively soft. He suddenly roared: *"AT ONE MINUTE PAST TWELVE TOMORROW NIGHT CAL-CIT BANK IS GOING TO HAVE TO EAT THAT CAR!"* His voice dropped. "The dealer recourse expires then, three months since initial delinquency, and Lou Cassavette isn't about to take back a seven-thousand-dollar car once it's gone over the wire. Not from a Gypsy."

Ballard hadn't really *forgotten* the Poteet Lincoln sedan, just had—well, let it slip by. A bounced down payment, three months delinquent. Now a deadline deal, with the deadline just 38 hours away.

"Dan, I can't get a live lead on this one."

"Ballard, I don't care if you boot one," said Kearny coldly. "Everyone does. But none of *my* men tell me they 'can't'."

Reviewing the Jennifer Poteet file under Kearny's critical eye, Ballard mentally cringed. The reports were pathetic. *Followed to given address, cruised the area. Vehicle not in sight. Returned several times during late evening and early morning hours without success.* A dozen such reports in the file, all written by himself. All he'd really discovered was that the 28-year-old subject was gone from her residence address in the Mission district, and that she had walked off her job at a North Beach topless joint.

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Dropping a dime for Information would have told them that much.

"We also know she's a John clan Gypsy," Kearny pointed out.

"How can we be sure of that?"

"The residence address is a storefront joint where only John clan Gyps live. If I'd seen this file sooner—" He looked up. "Why didn't I?" It was just a question, not badgering.

"This is the first Gypsy file I've worked."

"It isn't the first one Giselle's worked."

Private investigators, law-enforcement officers, auto dealers, and retail credit men all know there is a flourishing Gypsy subculture in this country, with its own royalty, its own unique clan structure, and a moral code relating only to other Gypsies. Punishments for those who break the code can range up to ritual murder. Piercing this spider web is not impossible, for money talks as loudly to Gypsies as to anyone else; but it takes time. And time was just what Kearny didn't have.

"Let's get at it," he growled. "Deadline's tomorrow night."

To Larry Ballard the hours until midnight, with sandwiches sent in, were a crash course in skiptracing as opposed to field work. They also explained why the DKA phone bill ran twenty grand a year.

Kearny began with long-distance calls to the motor vehicle departments of Georgia and Mississippi, where cars sometimes are licensed without actual proof of ownership. No record. Then he called Louisiana, where such fraudulently registered vehicles sometimes get a clear title which bypasses original lien holders such as Cal-Cit Bank. No record.

"So it probably still has California plates," said Kearny.

Ballard learned that the seven main western Gypsy clans—John, Miller, Ristick, Costello, Ephrem, Ellis, and Steve—use some fifty regular aliases and, on fraudulent credit applications, such supposed occupations as boilermakers, brass workers, coppersmiths, church vestment salesmen, silversmiths, photographer, and many others.

"Did you ask around that go-go joint in North Beach where the subject was supposed to be the house photographer?"

"She worked at the club, Dan," said Ballard, "But as a topless waitress. She was so kooky that they were glad to see her leave."

Kearny gave him a list of Sheriffs, State Police agencies, repossessors, skiptracers, and local cops to phone around the country. He discovered that the Jones and Stanley clans were attending the funeral of a Gypsy prince in Toledo, Ohio; that the Blake clan had been operating a florist shop in Buffalo, New York, to establish credit for a big color TV set haul; that the Nicholas and Mitchell clans were in Clearwater, Florida, waiting for the carnival

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season to open; and that more than 50 wanted Gypsy vehicles had been discovered on a farm near Clear Lake, Indiana. Of Jennifer Poteet, however, he discovered nothing.

At 3:30 p.m. he got his first break: an Arizona policeman once had arrested the subject for operating a fraudulent mitt camp at a County Fair midway. With this information, Kearny learned from another fortuneteller near Santa Rosa that the subject had a brother named Rudolph Marino. Then the lead seemed to die.

At 8:00 p.m. Marino's wife, reached by phone at Portland, explained that Marino had been in the Oregon state pen for nearly a year on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon while in commission of a felony.

At midnight Kearny leaned back and knuckled his reddened eyes. The desk was littered with papers, the ashtrays were overflowing, the soundproofed office was close and stale.

Ballard rubbed the back of his neck. "What do we do now? Punt?"

"We keep digging. Cassavette has the idea we can't produce; he wants to be sitting in his used car lot tomorrow at midnight when we *don't* bring in that Lincoln sedan. Which wouldn't help us at the bank one damned bit." He grinned wolfishly. "Be here at six in the morning."

It was 6:01 a.m. Although DKA wouldn't open for another hour and a half, Giselle Marc stuck her gleaming blonde head into Kearny's cubbyhole. "Any luck, guys?"

"What are you doing here?" In the same tone Kearny said to Ballard, "Larry, this is the girl I was telling you about."

"No kidding? And she looks like such a sweet kid, too."

"All right, you cats—" began Giselle.

"We haven't turned up a thing," Kearny said. "Did you see Kathy last night?"

She nodded. "I'm worried about her, Dan. She looks terrible but she won't see a doctor. Says she's just tired."

When she left, Kearny pushed aside his very real concern for Kathy Onoda. He began, "Poteet must not be using any common Gypsy alias." His eyes suddenly gleamed. "Larry, what was that number for Marino's wife in Portland?"

Ballard told him, objecting, "But Marino's in the pen, Dan."

"His wife isn't." Kearny used the area code so that it would seem like a local call. "Hello? Mrs. Marino? This is Morning Wake-Up from station KXWR in Portland. Have you been listening . . . my phone call woke you up? Well, Mrs. Marino, you—can I call you something besides Mrs?—Neya? A lovely name. And for being such a good sport, Neya, we are giving you an electric carving knife *ab*solutely free —you just have to pick it up here in

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Studio C at KXWR. Oh, could we have your maiden name for identification purposes? That's right, Neya. And could you spell that? Z-L-A-T-C-H-I. Fine. Thanks and 'bye, Neya."

Ballard shut his mouth, which had been hanging open wide enough to catch flies. "What if she'd asked for the studio address?"

"I'd have made one up," said Kearny airily. "Like I made up the studio." He leaned forward to pluck a cigarette from the pack on the desk. "The subject was busted once for running a fortunetelling skam, right? She's not traveling with other Gyps or our informants would have turned her up, right? So what's she doing for eating money? We start checking for a palm reader named Madame Neya or Madame Zlatchi."

"Seems like an awfully long shot, Dan."

"We don't have any short ones left," grunted Kearny.

His third phone call broke the case. A San Pedro Gypsy informant, grumbling about being got out of bed, said a Madame Neya was reading tea leaves at a joint a few miles from Palm Springs.

"We've got a field agent in Riverside—" Ballard began.

"—who's too brittle to find the Lincoln and get it back up here in seventeen and a half hours. No." Kearny jerked his wallet from his inside jacket pocket. "Here's fifty bucks, Larry. I'll drive you to the airport, you get the jet shuttle to L.A.—it only takes forty minutes. You can catch the eight-twenty Palm Springs flight from there." He stood up, gesturing impatiently. "C'mon. Let's move."

They moved. Larry Ballard was in Palm Springs by 9:14 a.m.

From the airport he called San Francisco. Kearny came on.

"I've contacted The Green Cactus, Larry. They only know that the subject has a shack in a date grove near Rancho Mirage, and that she shows up for work at six o'clock every night. You'll have to find that shack if you're to get the Lincoln back here in time."

On the blacktop beyond the airport Ballard pushed his rented Mustang up to 70; but an open Cadillac deVille rocketed past him like an errant moon probe, its pilots a pair of bleached blondes goggled with wrap-around sunglasses. They waved airily; marvelous what sunshine and an assured income did for your outlook, Ballard thought.

At a stationery store in the rich, still somnolent town he got a blow-up map of the area, and at a gas station he got directions to the nearest firehouse. The red trucks gleamed in a driveway still puddled from their morning bath. A lean browned man in heavy rubber boots like a buccaneer's was wiping the chrome grille of a truck.

"Dirt roads through the date groves near Rancho Mirage that

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might have shacks on 'em?" He dropped his chamois into his bucket and dried his hands. "Let's go inside and take a look at the wall map."

Twenty minutes later Ballard was on his way, his head full of local lore and his map full of wavy pencil squiggles, on one of which he hoped to find Madame Neya.

It took him just under two hours.

He had turned off a dirt road between the Thunderbird Club and the Shadow Mountain Club on a pair of hardened ruts meandering off into the date groves. Clouds of tan dust swirled around the car when he drove across a dry wash and then stopped abruptly. Just ahead, some 30 yards, the tail of a black Lincoln sedan protruded from behind a date palm.

He drove on, slowly. Yes. The Lincoln had the correct license number, and the shack was there, too, like something out of the Oklahoma migrations of the 'thirties. 12:01 p.m.: eleven hours, 59 minutes left.

Ballard returned to the highway, locked the Mustang, and laid the keys on top of the left-rear wheel. Then he walked back, trying to steel himself. Mustn't blow it by being soft. One girl he'd been soft with, Jocelyn Mayfield, had ended up killing herself.

Palm fronds tickled the roof drily; his shoes were soundless in the soft dust. As he quietly opened the door of the Lincoln the screen door on the porch slammed. The woman was as tall as Ballard, nearly six feet, with a striking face—straight nose, high cheekbones, thin lips.

She pointed a carmine-tipped finger. "You are accursed!" Her deep, rich, angry voice raised the hairs on the back of Ballard's neck.

"Miss Jennifer Poteet?"

"I am Madame Neya," she intoned.

Thin loops of beaten gold gleamed in her pierced earlobes, and set inside the edges of the ears, which also were pierced, were small beads of gold. Her legs were superb, and her plunging neckline suggested that she wore no brassiere. Her very femaleness lessened her impact.

"Madame Neya, huh?" said Ballard. "Jennifer Poteet to the bank."

"Ah." She expelled a breath, again drawing his eyes to her neckline. "You have come to take poor Madame Neya's car."

"That's it——come all the way from San Francisco."

She led him through a living room, furnished only with a beaten-down couch, a new color TV, and a dozen garish hippie posters, through a small dark bedroom, and into the kitchen. It was very dirty, with dishes piled high in the sink. She leaned back against the stove, arms crossed; her eyes were such a deep blue they were nearly violet.

"Now, Mr. Car Thief man, what can I do to keep my Lincoln?"

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"You should have done it four months ago. All you can do now is to remove any personal property and give me the keys. I have to get it back to San Francisco by midnight."

She smiled warmly; her eyelashes were very long and very dark, Outside a desert bird called brokenly in the noonday heat. "Don't you want to go to bed with me?" she purred.

Ballard was not really successful in putting boredom into his voice; she was a lot of woman. "Where are the keys, Jennifer?"

She realized then that he actually meant to take the car, and her face got momentarily ugly; her eyes flashed and her fingers worked, like a cat sheathing and unsheathing its claws. Then she suddenly laughed.

"So. You take Madame Neya's beautiful car. I gave them the good run for it, eh?" She turned to the stove, her face calculating but her eyes dancing with some arcane Gypsy delight. "Anyway, a cup of coffee before you go, eh? To show there is no hard feeling?"

"Okay." She obviously was playing for time—for the arrival of a friend, perhaps; but the coffee already was hot. She added half-and-half and a lump of sugar for Ballard, drank hers black like a woman conscious of her figure. Ballard knew he certainly was conscious of it.

"Still not too late to change your mind, Mr. Car Thief man."

Maybe she really *was* a mind reader; but Ballard said, "Sorry, Jennifer, just the coffee. But I can give you a ride to work."

She shrugged, finally giving up. "My boy friend picks me up every day. I thought maybe today he would come early."

He'd been right about her stalling for time. He guzzled his coffee, which was vile, just remembering that he'd left the coil wire in the Lincoln instead of removing it as he should have.

"You giving me those keys, Jennifer?"

Her face was sullen again. "They're on the counter."

He got to the living room before she called out behind him. The odd resonance of her voice turned him almost against his will. She was standing in the center of the dim bedroom like a nighttime animal in its den; her violet eyes gleamed ferally, her magnificent breast heaved.

"You hope to get that car to San Francisco by midnight? You will not get it there . . . *at all.*" Her eyes rolled up and her voice rose, to pierce his eardrums like an eagle's cry. "Oh, ye who sow discord, where are you? Ye who infuse hatreds and propagate enmities, I conjure you: fulfill your work—so that *never again shall this man go in peace.*"

Ballard tried to speak, but his throat was dry; he tried to laugh, but her voice still echoed in his brain. She was rigid, one arm extended, a blood-tipped finger point-

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ing him out for her private Evils.

Then the spell was broken and Ballard was through the door and off the sagging, unpainted porch. His shadow seemed to hunch at his feet uneasily as he scuffed through the dust toward the Lincoln; he drove away with his eyes unconsciously fixed on the rear-view mirror.

Jennifer Poteet. Some woman. He checked the time: over eleven hours to drive 500 miles. At a gas station he filled up, made out the veicle condition report, and called the Sheriff about the repo, the rental agency about the Mustang. He felt better once he was on the open highway. How about that chick? *Cursing* him! And in broad daylight!

It started about an hour later—a little after 2:00 p.m. At first he thought it was just the broiling sun, so he switched on the air conditioner. It didn't help. His palms were sweaty and when he took a hand from the wheel it was tremoring. He kept his mind carefully away from the curse; after all, how silly could you get?

But the sun *was* intense. Why? What did it have against him? He was squinting. This time of year the sun set about 4:30; he'd be glad when it was gone. The Lincoln whispered down the freeway at 80. The damned thing was *drinking* gas. What reason did it have?

Ballard began to laugh softly. A curse, huh? He said aloud, "What are you laughing at?" To reassure himself he added, "Don't worry, I'm not laughing at you."

The last five minutes by the dashboard clock had been longer than the preceding five minutes. This struck him as funny, so he laughed once more. Why worry about getting the car to San Francisco before midnight when the minutes were getting steadily longer?

On a sudden whim he pushed down the automatic door lock. No use taking chances. At this speed it was doubtful if anything dangerous could get into the car with him, but it paid to be sure. He felt a slight chill at the thought, and thrust his hands into his pockets to warm them, and the perverse Lincoln swerved wildly. He grabbed the wheel. What the hell was going on? He shook his head to clear it of the light dancing from the chromework of approaching cars. Marvelous colors in that supposedly silver gleam of reflected sunlight—and how loud the sound of his tires was on the pavement! By stretching his ears he could even hear the tires of approaching autos.

Los Angeles. Intensely vivid streets. And then, waiting at a light, he saw Madame Neya. She was tiny, viewed through a telescope turned wrong-end to, but even at this distance he could see her great violet eyes. Eyes? Or empty sockets?

The head whipped toward him at

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sickening speed. It was huge. Then the lights changed, and the cars behind began to blare their hostility; but how could he drive right through that giant balloon face bobbing right in front of his windshield? Had to. Gritting his teeth, he jammed down the accelerator. The tires shrieked.

No, not the tires. Madame Neya, rolling over and over in his rearview mirror, her mouth distended, her teeth gleaming, her larynx working to form the screams. The words, rather.

ye who infuse hatreds—— fulfill your work—— never go in peace

Jocelyn Mayfield, screaming for peace, had slashed both her wrists because Ballard had taken her car and her man had beaten her

a Lincoln—— he looked about the car—— *this* Lincoln?

in San Francisco

Strength flowed through him. He had to get to San Francisco, help Jocelyn. Tell her not to do it. San Francisco by midnight

Somehow he got through Los Angeles

Serenity brushed him with gentle wings as he climbed into the darkening Tehachepi mountains on The Grapevine. How had he let a curse frighten him so? Jennifer, after all, was behind him, run down in Los Angeles, bleeding in a gutter—— only Jocelyn was ahead—— Jocelyn dead—— but death, birth, decay—— all were natural processes

Staring at the great clustered rock formations flanking the highway he realized that even stone decayed. It was a monotheistic universe: God was good, God was everywhere. But how to reach Him? How to say "sorry" to Him?

Ballard glanced at the gas gauge, and terror shattered serenity. Nearly EMPTY. Only a theistic, vengeful God would do that to Larry Ballard—— Larry Ballard—— guilty ——guilty

don't panic—— He regarded the gauge cunningly. Had to stop for gas, had to act natural. Station ahead. Breathe deeply—— *don't panic*

He pulled in on the cement apron and waited while the attendant came around to the driver's side. Through the closed window he mouthed the words, "Fill 'er up." He watched the attendant set the hose, wash the windshield. The wrist of the hand wiping the paper towels back and forth was delicate, like a woman's. Like Jocelyn Mayfield's wrist. My God! The wrist was bleeding—— green blood was washing down the glass

"Okay under the hood, sir?"

"What?" The blood was gone. "Oh. Yes. Okay. Fine."

"Eight-fifty, sir."

He was just a kid; how did they corrupt them so young? Ballard touched the button to lower the window an inch. It took twenty minutes, but the attendant did not hold out his hand. Hiding that slashed wrist—— then as he reached for

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Ballard's ten-dollar bill his left eye popped out on his cheek—— Ballard could see into the socket—— into the brain—— could see the thoughts forming sluggishly in the convoluted lobes

accursed—— the word glowed redly

The grease-rimed fingers took an hour to close over the bill and all that time the eyeball swayed gracefully on its cable of optic muscle—— the fingers moved away with the bill—— the eye swayed

Ballard slyly had left the ignition key on to check that the tank actually was filled. Now he saw his chance. He twisted the key, slammed the accelerator to the floor while he snapped the transmission into DRIVE. Fishtailing wildly, the Lincoln screamed back out onto the highway. Safe.

Time, which was eternity, stretched ahead to midnight and the deadline. Darkness had come. Lights. From the cavern of his headlights, thrown down the blackness ahead, came life—— from Cambrian seas to Devonian slime to Carboniferous forests.

He drove on—— one hundred and fifty million years passed in a single hour by his watch—— then with a sudden sob Ballard admitted it all—— he was guilty—— accursed.

when the night of action has arrived, the operator shall gather up his goatskin, the stone called Ematille, two vervain crowns, two candles of virgin wax, and four nails from the coffin of a dead child

Time passing. Half-remembered greenglow freeway signs. Bakersfield. Fresno. Modesto. Must have stopped for gas again—gauge all right. He couldn't make it—— had to atone—— had to save Jocelyn —— but the razor blade was laid full-edge against the pulsing blue veins on the wrist of the girl seated beside him on the front seat

No, Jocelyn! Not because of an *automobile!* I won't

A sudden convulsive movement —— blood bubbling up and running down the slim white arm—— glowing eyes solemn beneath dark brows gazing sadly into his as her blood ran free

Staring in terror, Ballard suddenly became aware that the top of the car had begun lowering, like the canopy of that terribly strange bed in that story he'd read in high school. It was pressing on his head now—— intolerable pressure

He began sobbing—— the flesh was melting from his hands—— what had begun as a soft suety look around the edges of his fingernails had become drops of hot tallow running down his wrists—— like the blood down Jocelyn's wrists to the cold tiles of the bathroom floor

He wrenched the wheel over. Had to stop before the flesh was gone, before the marrow dried and the bones fell apart. Had to atone for Jocelyn for Jennifer for a hundred others. He was accursed

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damned. Had to stop get out walk in front of the next passing car

he waited

Better now—— areas of the headlights which had been detached and revolving like mobiles, giving him glimpses of the eyeless sockets from which they had come, had begun to steady. Soon now he would atone. He watched the headlights through closed, opaque lids. Soon now—— Soon

The door, jerked open, nearly spilled Ballard on the ground. The overhead light dazzled him, but the headlights now were normal. So was the gruff voice, demanding, "Hey, buddy, you okay?"

"What? Huh?" His head ached slightly. "Oh." He could see the gleaming leather belt and starchly crisp uniform of the highway patrol.

"I said, you okay, buddy?" The patrolman's nose was quivering, trying to smell booze. As Ballard watched, the nose began to lengthen and hair began to sprout on the man's cheeks—— he was turning into a fox——

Ballard rubbed his eyes. The face was normal again.

"Sure. Thanks, officer. I got— sleepy." He yawned involuntarily. "Thought I'd better pull off the road. What time is it?"

"Ten forty-five."

Ten forty-five? Urgency shook him. "How far to San Francisco?"

"Just under seventy miles; you're right out of Manteca."

Ballard watched the lights of the parked police car in his rear-view mirror as he pulled away. If that cop hadn't stopped— What the hell had happened? Jennifer's curse? He shuddered. As he roared on through the night, holding the big Lincoln sedan at 85, occasional demons still lurched beyond his arc of headlights; but they dissolved when he turned his face to meet them.

Would he make the deadline? He used Highway 50, taking the MacArthur freeway rather than the Nimitz. After the tricky interchanges at Oakland he swept down to the Bay Bridge's gold-lit toll plaza. On the bridge he shattered the 50 m.p.h. speed limit; using the Ninth Street off-ramp gave him a straight shot across Market and over to Van Ness Avenue.

At 11:56 p.m. he turned sedately into the Crescent Motors used-car lot on Van Ness and Eddy, cut the motor and lights, and got the condition report from the glove compartment. The small shed at the rear of the lot spilled out light; he needed only carry the condition report up those three wooden steps, get it signed, and he'd make the deadline.

But he couldn't move. His hands shook on the wheel with delayed reaction; his body refused to function. Sweat stood out on his face.

Then from the darkness came a Negro. He was grinning. The breadth of his shoulders and the

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thickness of his chest gave an impression of bulk, but his hips were narrow and he moved with the grace of an athlete. Ballard released a long sigh. Bart Heslip, ex-boxer, for three years a DKA field agent. He'd trained Ballard, and was Ballard's best friend. Heslip opened the door.

"Hey, dad, what the hell you doin'? Waiting for the deadline to pass?" Ballard didn't speak. "What's the matter, man, you stoned?"

Then he saw the sweat on Ballard's face. He grunted, reached in to grab the condition report, and strode away without looking back.

Inside the shed a broad, heavy man in his thirties was reading a girlie magazine, one leg cocked on the dusty surface of his desk. A dead cigar jutted from a corner of his mouth. Heslip opened the door.

"Yeah?" The cigar switched corners without apparent volition.

"Cassavette?"

"Me." The big man stood up and yanked the cigar from his mouth and was balanced easily on the balls of his feet in one smooth movement.

"DKA's man. The Jennifer Poteet repo is outside. Keys are in it."

"I'll be a bird." From the doorway he looked out at the black gleaming auto. "I'll be a *dirty* bird. I tried to turn up this chick myself; would have sworn *nobody* could find her before the deadline—"

"How about kind of checking it in now?"

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered absently, scrawling his name and the magic numerals 11:59 p.m. across the bottom of the condition report. "Hey, look, where the hell did you find her?"

"It'll all be in the field report," said Heslip smoothly.

Ballard had finally got out and was leaning against the fender, wiping his face on his jacket sleeve. Heslip punched him lightly on the arm in passing, and they walked away, leaving Cassavette shaking his head over the DEALER copy of the condition report.

Heslip silently drove the company car out through the darkened Western Addition on Fell street. He'd planned to drive over to his apartment on Steiner, where Corinne Jones was waiting for them; but it seemed better now to get Larry out to his own place on Lincoln Way near the Park. Corinne could wait. When you worked this job, your woman did a lot of waiting.

Finally he turned to Ballard. "Okay, baby. Give."

Ballard gave, his voice quickening over the recital, becoming compulsive, almost hysterical; he talked as fast as he could form the words. The curse. The strange derangements of the drive up.

"Cursed, huh? And you feel good now? Just a little headache?"

"Yeah. Bart, this Madame Neya said—"

"It started with sweaty palms, irritation at light, anxiety, physical

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disorientation, feelings of guilt and oppression—"

"That's it," Ballard exclaimed excitedly. "Do you suppose—"

"Don't suppose. *Know*. That wasn't any curse, baby. You've been on a bad trip."

"Bad trip?" Ballard's face had gone slack with surprise.

"LSD. Acid. Lysergic acid diethylamide tartrate. She gave it to you in the sugar cube, and an hour later—*VOOM!* Tripsville."

"But *why*, Bart? I could have smashed up the car, been killed—"

"Just what she wanted; hell, *she'd* lost it anyway. She *wanted* you to think you'd been cursed. Mumbo-Jumbo, god of the Congo, all that jazz." He shook his head admiringly. "Chick plays *rough*, man."

When the light at Stanyan stopped them, Ballard suddenly realized where they were going. "Hey!" he exclaimed, "isn't Corinne waiting for you over at your place? I don't want you to—"

"Cool it, dad, I'll get you home, pour some coffee into you—"

"*Coffee?*" exclaimed Larry Ballard. His face suddenly was sick.

Heslip looked over at him. After a moment Heslip began to shake. Then he couldn't hold it in and let out a roar of laughter. Yeah, man! The Lincoln sedan car was in the barn by the deadline, all right, and Larry Ballard had put it there. But Larry Ballard, boy acid-head, was going to be hearing about curses, and sugar in his coffee, for a long, long time around DKA. Bart Heslip would see to that.

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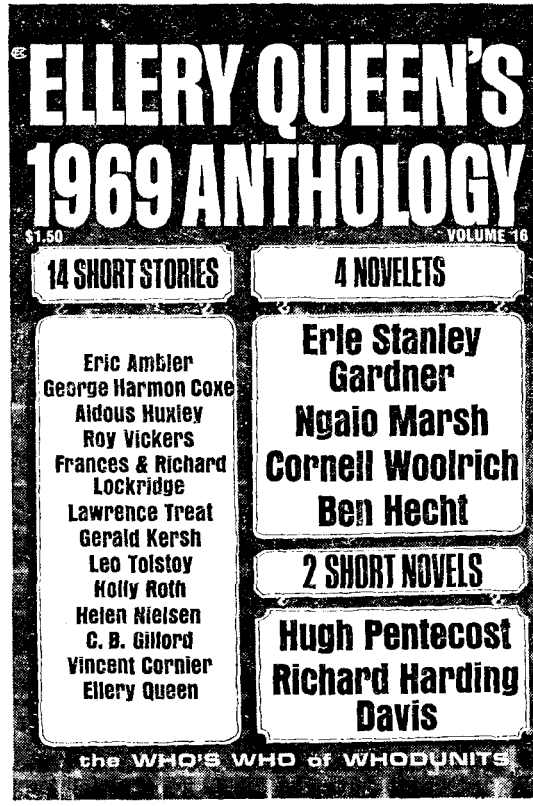

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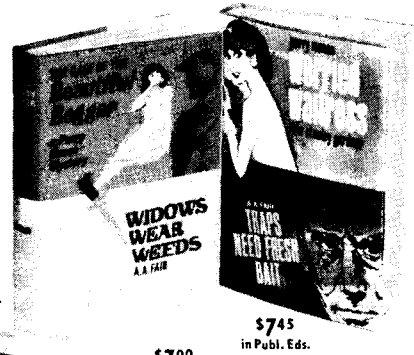

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